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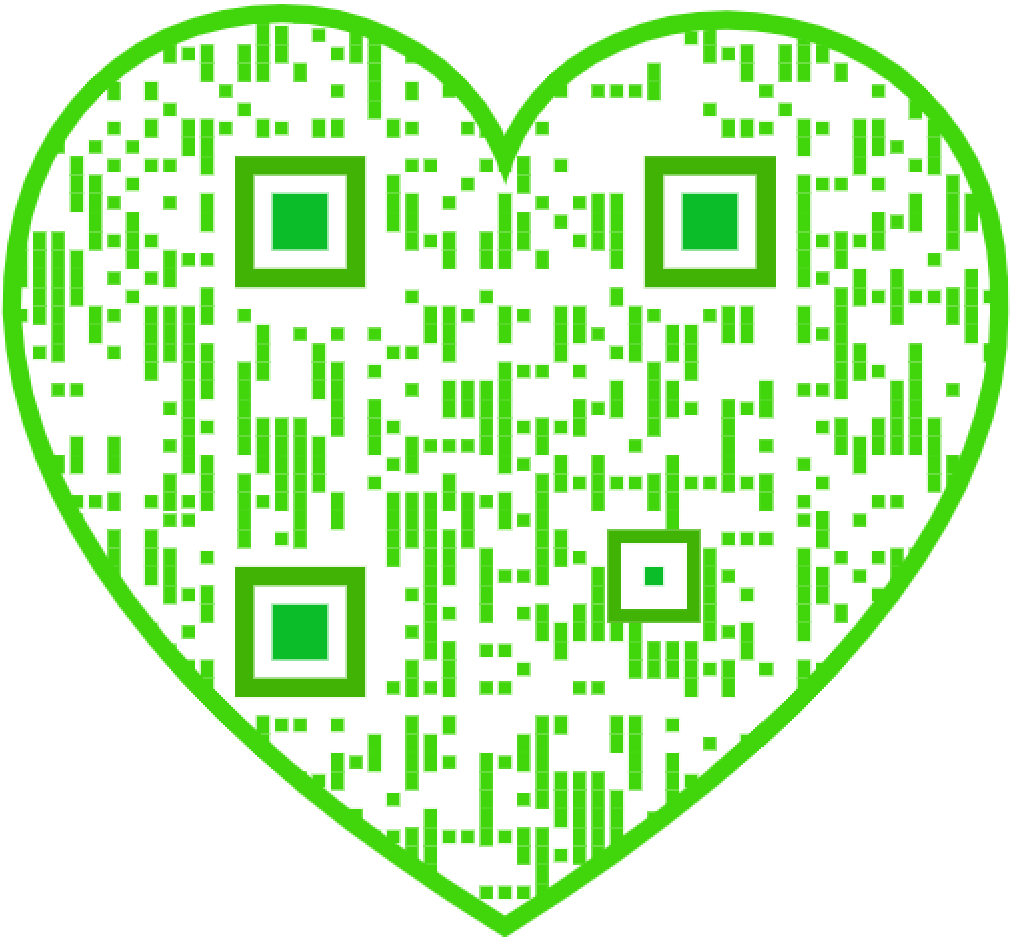
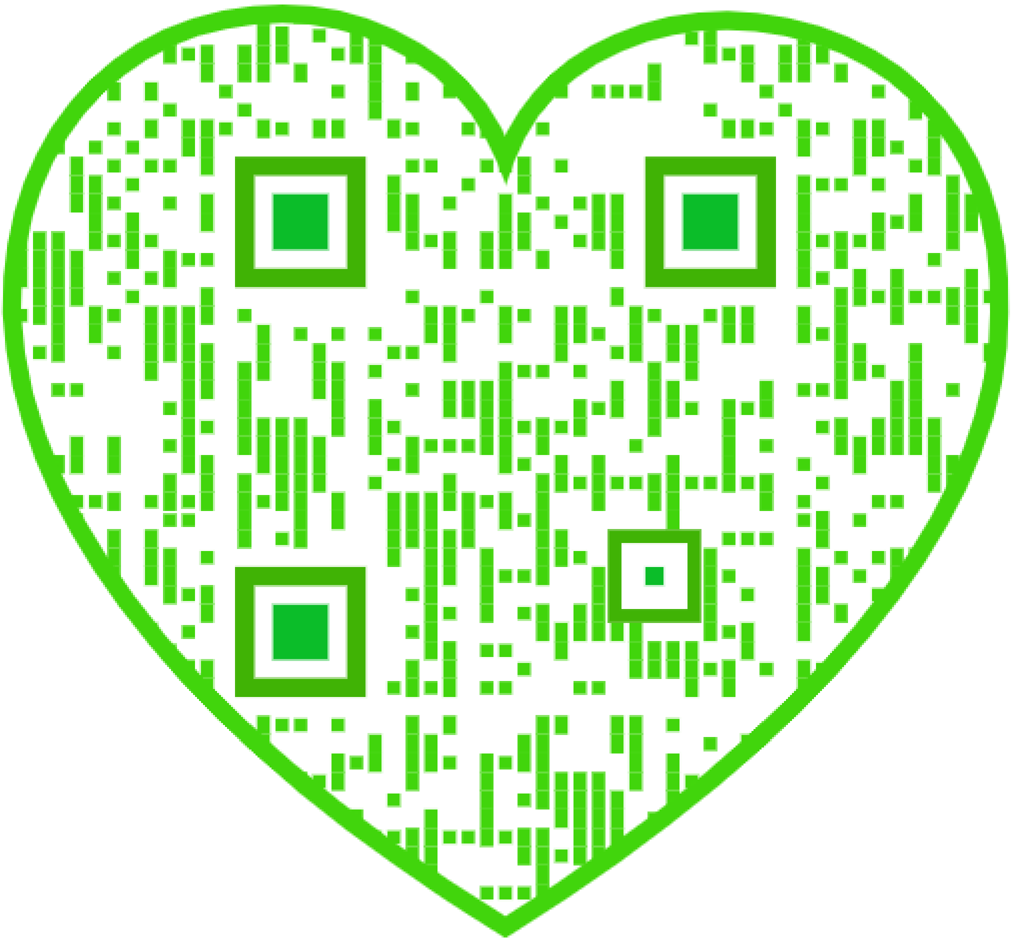
Digital Edition

FUTURE
SIXTH EDITION





101 dream TRAVEL LOCATIONS

Welcome

We all have a wish list of places we'd like to visit around the world, whether it's beautiful beaches, majestic mountains, stunning cities or a combination of all these features and more. As one location gets ticked off the list, another is usually added! 101 Dream Travel Locations is the ultimate companion for anyone looking to turn their travel dreams into a reality. Packed with information on what to see and do, how to get around, where to stay and eat, and a whole lot more, the hardest decision to make will be where to go first. Organised by continent, and numbered for reference, it's important to point out that the places are by no means ranked, because we believe each experience is subjective and unique to the individual. So, what are you waiting for? Sit back, relax and start planning your next dream getaway!

The
ADVENTURE
begins

DISCLAIMER

Due to the ongoing Ukraine-Russia and Israel-Gaza wars, some destinations in this book are no longer safe to visit because the situations are unpredictable and could further escalate without warning. Nearby countries in those regions may also be affected. Where you see this icon, most governments strongly advise against all travel to these countries.

The content of this book was written prior to the Coronavirus pandemic, which has had a dramatic impact on global travel. The locations, activities and websites mentioned within may no longer be available or appropriate, therefore this book should be used as a source of inspiration only. Always check the current travel guidelines when planning a trip, and adhere to any local restrictions at your destination.

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Contents

Europe

01 Paris
page 12

02 Santorini
page 14

03 Cappadocia
page 15

04 Amsterdam
page 16

05 St Moritz
page 18

06 The Azores
page 19

07 Tuscany
page 20

08 Prague
page 22

09 Plitvice Lakes
page 23

10 Arctic Circle
page 24

11 Santa Claus Village
page 25

12 French Riviera
page 26

13 Saint Tropez
page 28

14 Cannes
page 29

15 Vienna
page 30

16 Cliffs of Moher
page 31

17 Venice
page 32

18 Lake Como
page 34

19 St Ptersburg
page 35

20 Ibiza
page 36

21 Dubrovnik
page 37

22 London
page 38

23 The Highlands
page 40

24 Stockholm
page 41

25 Reykjavik
page 42

26 Istanbul
page 43

27 Rome
page 44

Africa & the Middle East

28 Marrakesh
page 48

29 Seychelles
page 50

30 Dubai
page 51

31 Sharm el-Sheik
page 52

32 Kilimanjaro
page 54

33 Cape Town
page 55

34 Zanzibar
page 56

35 Jerusalem
page 57

36 Masa Marai
page 58

37 Cape Verde
page 62

38 River Nile
page 63

39 Tel Aviv
page 64

40 Mauritius
page 65

41 Socotra Island
page 66

42 The Pyramids of Giza
page 67

43 Madagascar
page 68

Asia

44 Lombok
page 72

45 Gili Islands
page 73

46 Mount Fuji
page 74

47 Goa
page 75

48 El Nido
page 76

49 Lake Issyk-Kul
page 77

50 Chiang Mai
page 78

51 Mandalay
page 80

52 Ubud
page 81

Asia continued...

53 Phuket
page 82

54 Koh Samui
page 83

55 Koh Tao
page 83

56 Koh Lanta
page 84

57 Koh Phangnan
page 85

58 Koh Phi Phi
page 85

59 Maldives
page 86

60 Ha Long Bay
page 87

61 Hong Kong
page 88

62 Bentota
page 89

63 Tokyo
page 90

64 Kathmandu
page 92

65 Sarawak
page 93

66 River Ganges
page 94

67 Angkor temples
page 96

68 Kerala
page 97

69 Himalayas
page 98

70 Everest
page 98

71 Annapurna Circuit
page 99

The Americas

72 Grand Canyon
page 102

73 Monteverde
page 104

74 Denali National Park
page 105

75 Hawaii
page 106

76 Atacama Desert
page 108

77 Bay Islands
page 109

78 New York City
page 110

79 Caribbean
page 112

80 Fernando de Noronha
page 116

81 Banff National Park
page 117

82 Los Angeles
page 118

83 Yosemite National Park
page 119

84 Hollywood
page 119

85 Ometepe
page 120

86 Cancún
page 121

87 Machu Picchu
page 122

88 Easter Island
page 123

89 Florida
page 124

90 Disney World
page 125

Australia, New Zealand & the Pacific Islands

91 Fraser Island
page 128

92 Queenstown
page 130

93 Christmas Island
page 131

94 Sydney
page 132

95 Great Barrier Reef
page 135

96 Daintree
page 137

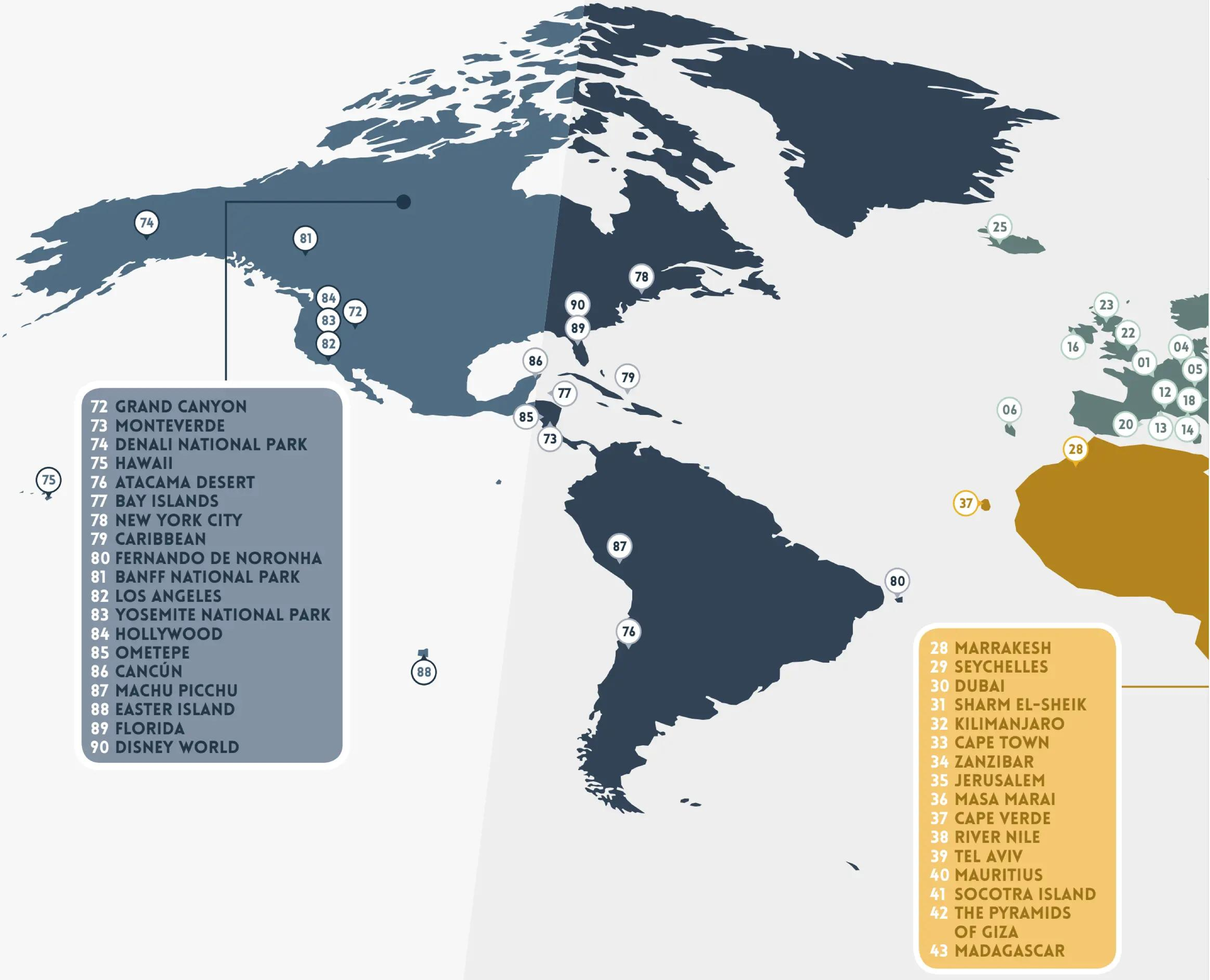
97 Fiji
page 138

98 Fiordland National Park
page 139

99 Tasmania
page 140

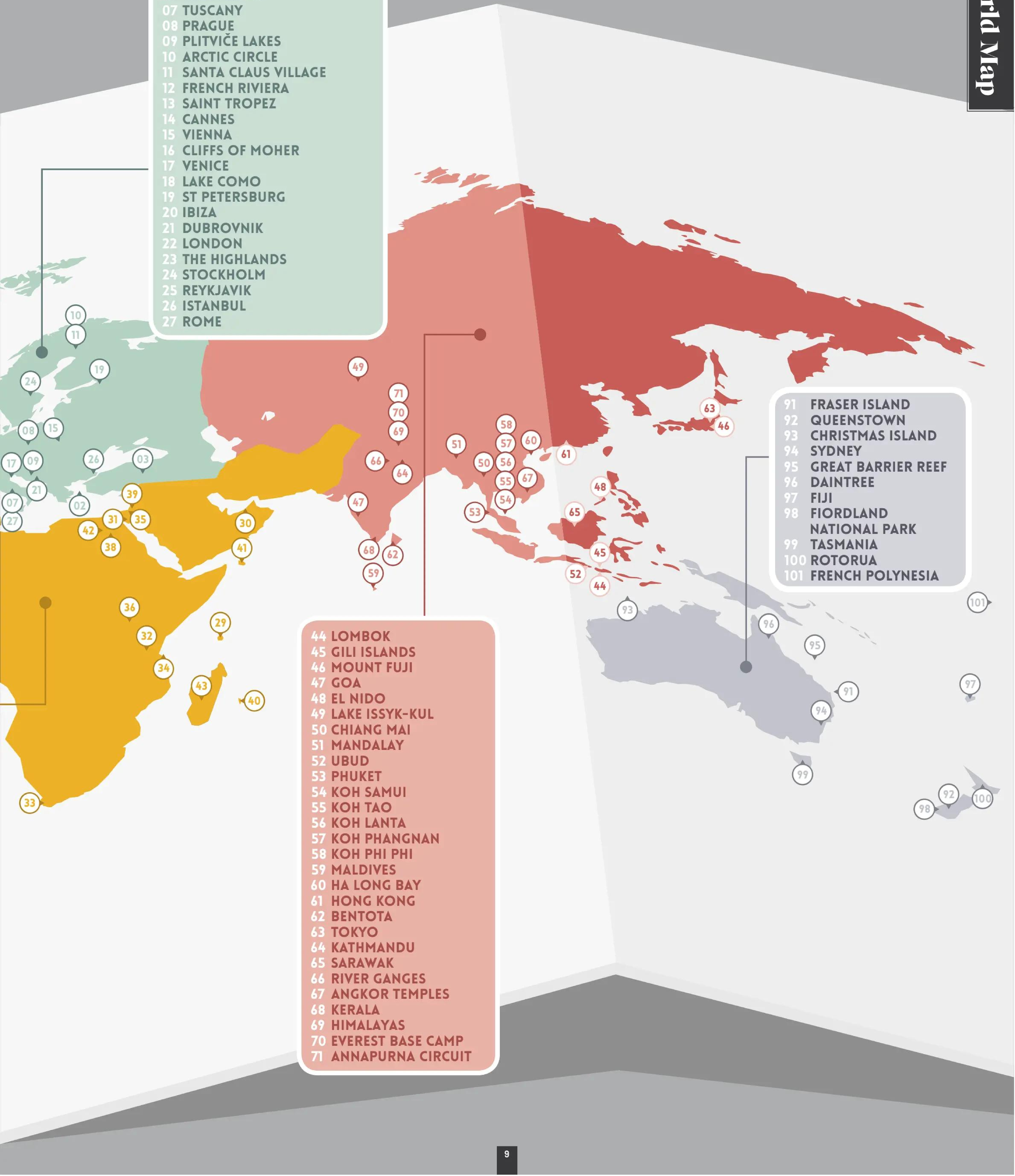
100 Rotorua
page 141

101 French Polynesia
page 142


74
81
84
83
72
82
78
90
89
86
79
77
85
73
75
87
80
76
88
25
23
22
16
01
04
05
12
18
06
20
13
14
28
37

72 GRAND CANYON
73 MONTEVERDE
74 DENALI NATIONAL PARK
75 HAWAII
76 ATACAMA DESERT
77 BAY ISLANDS
78 NEW YORK CITY
79 CARIBBEAN
80 FERNANDO DE NORONHA
81 BANFF NATIONAL PARK
82 LOS ANGELES
83 YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK
84 HOLLYWOOD
85 OMETEPE
86 CANCÚN
87 MACHU PICCHU
88 EASTER ISLAND
89 FLORIDA
90 DISNEY WORLD

28 MARRAKESH
29 SEYCHELLES
30 DUBAI
31 SHARM EL-SHEIK
32 KILIMANJARO
33 CAPE TOWN
34 ZANZIBAR
35 JERUSALEM
36 MASA MARAI
37 CAPE VERDE
38 RIVER NILE
39 TEL AVIV
40 MAURITIUS
41 SOCOTRA ISLAND
42 THE PYRAMIDS OF GIZA
43 MADAGASCAR


10
11
49
19
24
71
70
58
63
15
08
69
46
60
57
51
17
09
26
03
66
50
56
61
64
55
67
48
21
39
54
07
02
47
53
65
27
31
35
30
42
38
41
68
62
45
59
52
44
101
36
93
96
29
32
95
34
43
97
91
40
94
99
92
100
33
98

01 PARIS
02 SANTORINI
03 CAPPADOCIA
04 AMSTERDAM
05 ST MORITZ
06 THE AZORES
07 TUSCANY
08 PRAGUE
09 PLITVIČE LAKES
10 ARCTIC CIRCLE
11 SANTA CLAUS VILLAGE
12 FRENCH RIVIERA
13 SAINT TROPEZ
14 CANNES
15 VIENNA
16 CLIFFS OF MOHER
17 VENICE
18 LAKE COMO
19 ST PETERSBURG
20 IBIZA
21 DUBROVNIK
22 LONDON
23 THE HIGHLANDS
24 STOCKHOLM
25 REYKJAVIK
26 ISTANBUL
27 ROME

44 LOMBOK
45 GILI ISLANDS
46 MOUNT FUJI
47 GOA
48 EL NIDO
49 LAKE ISSYK-KUL
50 CHIANG MAI
51 MANDALAY
52 UBUD
53 PHUKET
54 KOH SAMUI
55 KOH TAO
56 KOH LANTA
57 KOH PHANGNAN
58 KOH PHI PHI
59 MALDIVES
60 HA LONG BAY
61 HONG KONG
62 BENTOTA
63 TOKYO
64 KATHMANDU
65 SARAWAK
66 RIVER GANGES
67 ANGKOR TEMPLES
68 KERALA
69 HIMALAYAS
70 EVEREST BASE CAMP
71 ANNAPURNA CIRCUIT

91 FRASER ISLAND
92 QUEENSTOWN
93 CHRISTMAS ISLAND
94 SYDNEY
95 GREAT BARRIER REEF
96 DAINTREE
97 FIJI
98 FIORDLAND NATIONAL PARK
99 TASMANIA
100 ROTORUA
101 FRENCH POLYNESIA

EUROPE

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01 *Paris*
page 12
-
02 *Santorini*
page 14
-
03 *Cappadocia*
page 15
-
04 *Amsterdam*
page 16
-
05 *St Moritz*
page 18
-
06 *The Azores*
page 19
-
07 *Tuscany*
page 20
-
08 *Prague*
page 22
-
09 *Plitvice Lakes*
page 23
-

10 Arctic Circle
page 24
-
11 Santa Claus Village
page 25
-
12 French Riviera
page 26
-
13 Saint Tropez
page 28
-
14 Cannes
page 29
-
15 Vienna
page 30
-
16 Cliffs of Moher
page 31
-
17 Venice
page 32
-
18 Lake Como
page 34
-
19 St Petersburg
page 35
-
20 Ibiza
page 36
-
21 Dubrovnik
page 37
-
22 London
page 38
-
23 The Highlands
page 40
-
24 Stockholm
page 41
-
25 Reykjavik
page 42
-
26 Istanbul
page 43
-
27 Rome
page 44
-

Paris

A mecca for artists and romantics, France's capital has plenty of gems waiting to be discovered

With its reputation as the 'city of love', Paris certainly has a lot to live up to – but in this sprawling city made up of winding streets and lookalike buildings, it's easy to find yourself stumbling into Paris's most romantic quarters.

Of all of Paris's districts, however, there's no arrondissement quite as spectacular and mesmerising as Montmartre. A suburb built up on the city's steepest hill, Montmartre thrived in the late 19th century as a creative hub, a mecca for all of Europe's greatest artists, including Picasso, Dalí, Van Gogh and Degas. With its cobbled streets, unspoilt vibe and wealth of independent shops and stalls, Montmartre is the living memory of the celebrated Belle Époque, a golden age of French history immortalised in film and literature.

To truly absorb the beauty of Montmartre, it's a good idea to spend a full day – and night – out and about. Visit one of the many crêperies that flank street corners for a chocolatey treat, then allow your feet to take you around town. Any trip to Montmartre isn't worth doing unless you visit the Basilica de Sacré-Coeur, where you'll be granted incredible panoramic views over the city. From here, walk around to the square at the back of the church, where you'll find yourself being hustled and charmed by local artists selling their wares. If you're feeling brave, pose for one of the market's infamous caricaturists!

If you'd rather soak up the art, there are several key locations to visit within minutes of the square – the local Dalí Paris show exhibits some of the kooky artist's key pieces, including one of his *Lobster Telephones*. Theodorus van Gogh, brother and patron of the celebrated Vincent van Gogh, lived on Rue Lepic, one of the small streets leading down from the Sacré-Coeur, where his brother lived with him from 1886 to 1888. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, another of Van Gogh's close acquaintances, also lived around the corner from the Van Gogh brothers.

Indeed, Montmartre is home to many Parisian institutions, including the infamous Moulin Rouge on one of the main roads through the arrondissement. Despite its less-than-convenient location, tourists flock to this iconic red windmill, keen to capture a photo. The cabaret itself still ranks as one of the best in Paris despite its fame. If you'd rather skip the crowd, however, head across town to Le Zèbre de Belleville for a more intimate, traditional experience.

While Montmartre might embody most people's expectations of Paris, the city has so much more to offer in its other arrondissements. Belleville, one of Paris's most diverse suburbs, is renowned for being among the coolest places in the city. Here, take a tour of the local graffiti art on Rue Dénoyez. Nearby is also the famed Père Lachaise cemetery, the final resting place of Oscar Wilde, Edith Piaf and Jim Morrison, among others. An unlikely destination on many tourists' itineraries, the cemetery is nevertheless a popular site and well worth a visit away from the hubbub of the general city.

Not that Paris is overwhelmed or overworked. In fact, Paris is unlike many of the world's capital cities in that its inhabitants take a very different view on life. Where Londoners or New Yorkers rush around, a week's worth of work to be done in a day, Parisians have embraced a rather different approach to living. Life is to be savoured and enjoyed; health and happiness come first. To visit Paris and to hurry around is very un-Parisian – why not take a tip from the locals? The city is filled with brasseries and cafés, restaurants and bars, so make the most of it. Most arrondissements have their own vibe; once you've found a place you like, sit down, sip

The iconic Eiffel Tower dominates the skyline around the city

Essential information

For a quick way to whizz through all Paris has to offer, hire an electric scooter for around £13 ($17) an hour.

Best time to visit

All year round

Time zone

UTC+1

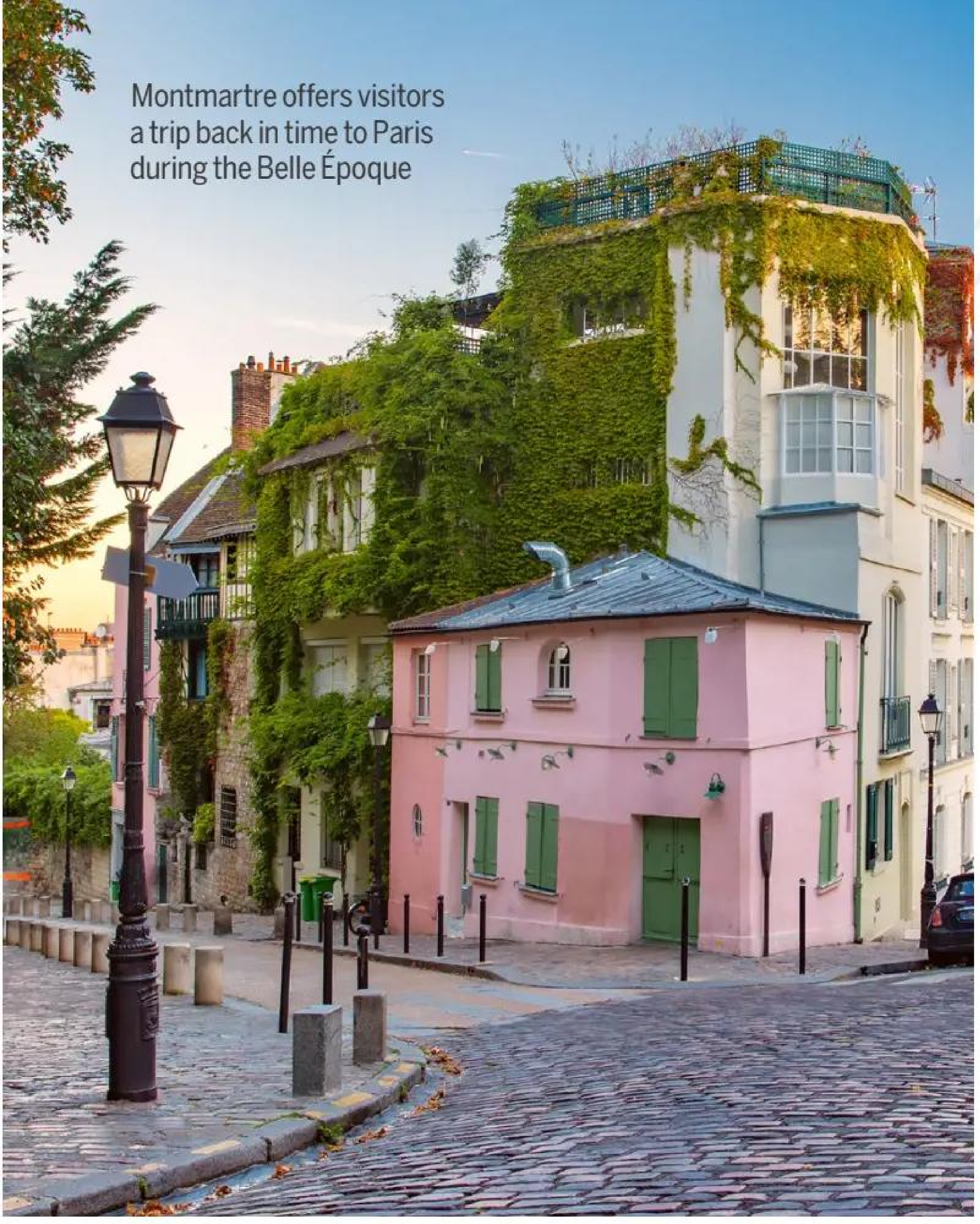
CURRENCY

€

EURO

Useful sites

EN.PARISINFO.COM
WWW.FRANCE.FR/EN/PARIS
APARISGUIDE.COM



Montmartre offers visitors a trip back in time to Paris during the Belle Époque

Enjoy the city on foot to see the best of what it has to offer

LIFE IS TO BE SAVOURED AND ENJOYED; HEALTH AND HAPPINESS COME FIRST

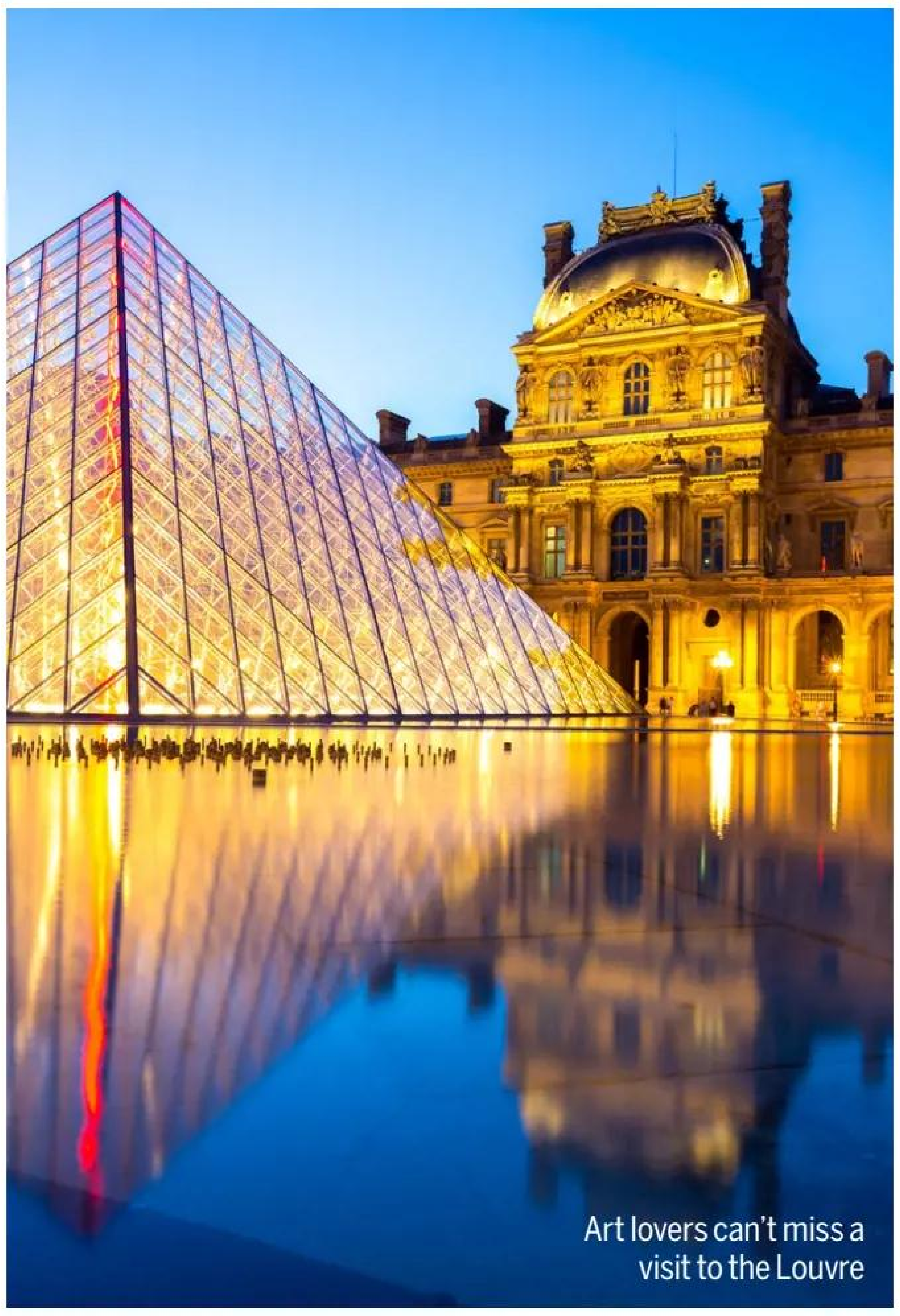
on a glass of wine and watch the world go by. Worthwhile visits include La Fée Verte in the 11th arrondissement, an absinthe bar inspired by the Belle Époque. For film buffs, the café featured in the film *Amélie* is down the road from Van Gogh's residence on Rue Lepic.

While Paris has long been hailed as the home of bohemian artists, there is another equally prodigious kind of person who considers the city an essential port of call. Any chef worth his salt has done a stint in France's capital, earning their stripes in the home of the world's greatest cuisine. Paris has been the make-or-break for many leading chefs, so naturally it's one of the greatest places in Europe to eat out.

While the city does have its fair share of fancy restaurants, excellent food and experimental cooking is available if you know where to look. Don't be tempted to visit the restaurants that line the key tourist spots – while the sight of visitors dining on mussels and sipping wine at their table might tempt you, often the better restaurants are tucked away off the beaten track. If you're visiting Paris during the week, you'll find that many of the city's restaurants offer cheaper lunch menus, or in the evening there will likely be a fixed menu for a reasonable cost. As well as eating out in Paris, be sure to enjoy the incredible wine on offer. Because France produces plenty of the world's wine, from Bordeaux to Merlot, you'll find that the cost of wine is much cheaper than anywhere else on the planet.

No trip to Paris is complete without soaking up the great art – pencil in a whole day to visit the Musée du Louvre. Built on the site of the old Louvre Castle, which was once residence for the French royals, the Louvre is a beautiful mix of old and new, with its glorious palatial complex contrasted by the glass pyramids in the museum's square. Inside the museum is equally spectacular, featuring some of the world's most celebrated artworks including the *Mona Lisa*, *Venus de Milo* and the celebrated *Liberty Leading the People*.

Another iconic Parisian institution that cannot be missed is the Eiffel Tower. Queues form quickly for this attraction, so head over as early as possible to get through security, and ascend before the crowds. With tickets costing about £22 ($28) to travel the 276 metres (906 feet) to the top, it's not the cheapest visit, but the view from the summit is worth it on a clear day. To make the most of your ticket, visit the exhibits, as well as the champagne bar at the top, or take in the views at the second-floor's restaurant.



Art lovers can't miss a visit to the Louvre

Visit plenty of Paris's best sites, including the breathtaking Sainte-Chapelle, for free on the first Sunday of every month

FREE MUSEUM OPENINGS

With so many incredible sites, galleries and museums to visit, Paris can quickly become an expensive place for tourists hoping to soak up the city's history and culture. However, the first Sunday of every month sees most museums open their doors for free. If you're lucky enough to be in town on this date, be sure to get up early to beat the crowds, as queues are quick to form at the more popular destinations. To make the most of the day, plan an itinerary, using the internet to find out how much time you're likely to spend at different sites. While you can lose yourself for hours in most of Paris's galleries, you may find that half an hour will suffice at other sites. It's worth checking online to find out which museums are part of the Sunday scheme – not all museums participate, and some that do will charge entry at peak summer season.

Sunset in the village of Oia provides that legendary Santorini snapshot you've been waiting for

Essential information

There are a lot of uphill donkey rides available in Fira – be sure to choose more ethical companies.

Best time to visit

April, May or September (to avoid the worst crowds)

Time zone

UTC+2

CURRENCY

€ EURO

Useful sites

WWW.SANTORINI.NET
WWW.VISITGREECE.GR/EN/GREEK_ISLANDS/SANTORINI
SANTORINISECRETS.COM

02

Santorini

Capture your own postcard moment on Greece's most iconic island

With its dazzling whitewashed buildings, trademark blue-domed churches, and dramatic clifftop towns, Santorini is arguably Greece's most recognisable location. This little island in the Aegean Sea offers so much beauty in such a small space, and visitors flock here in their millions to watch the sun set over its red, rocky landscape.

But this haven of tranquillity was not always so; the island had explosive beginnings. Its unique shape – it resembles a reverse 'C' enveloping some smaller islands – was caused by an extremely violent volcanic eruption thousands of years ago. What's left is the remains of a volcano caldera that flooded with seawater. The people of Santorini soon built a new civilisation, perilously clinging to the sides of the old rim.

As you might expect from anywhere in Greece, Santorini (also known as Thira) is packed with archaeological treasures, including an entire village known as Akrotiri, which overlooks much of the island. There, you'll see the foundations of a grand temple, and colourful frescoes that have miraculously withstood the test of time.

When you want to return to the present, you can meander about Santorini's more modern towns and villages, which seem to climb up the old volcano like a stairway into Greece's perfect blue skies. Browse the charming little shops of Oia, or take a leisurely cable car ride from the port to the main town of Fira. While you're in town, don't forget to feast your eyes on elaborate Byzantine churches, which feature gilded chandeliers and painstakingly painted murals of Christian imagery.

In Fira, the largest settlement on the island, you can enjoy a panoramic view of the entire caldera, or check out some of the local history museums. If you'd prefer a more typical Santorini view, head ten kilometres (6.2 miles) north to visit Oia, the village where that distinctive Santorini photo is set. You know the one: the colourful village overlooking a rocky seaside, which the Greek tourist board adores.

If you're looking for more active pursuits, Santorini has much to offer. Hike up to Skaros Rock, a precarious outcrop that was once home to a medieval fort. Or trek all the way down to Red Beach – an almost alien setting where the red, sandy cliffs of Santorini meet the turquoise waters of the Aegean Sea.

At the end of your day exploring all of the island's delights, you'll be in need of some well-earned rest and relaxation. Get yourself to a seaside taverna – Amoudi Bay is a particularly scenic spot – and sip on a glass of Santorini's famous red wine, which is said by some to be the best in all of Greece. While you're at it, order some tomatokeftedes – a Santorini speciality of deep-fried local tomatoes (famed for their deliciously sweet taste) and classic Greek feta cheese.

Santorini offers some of the most luxurious hotels in the world, so if you're staying in one of those, you're in for a treat. Relax in infinity pools that stretch seamlessly out over the water, giving you a stunning view of the volcanic landscape. If you're in more modest accommodation, you can still enjoy the wonderfully Greek 'philoxenia' (love to strangers/guests) that your hosts will undoubtedly offer – after all, you are in Greece's most sought-after destination.

The landscape of Cappadocia reflects the ancient erosion of sedimentary rock, which resulted in spectacular natural formations

Cappadocia

Travellers experience another world in the ancient region of Cappadocia in central Turkey

Its moonscape is otherworldly, its cave dwellings spectacular, and its record of human existence awe inspiring.

In the heartland of Turkey, Cappadocia is dotted with towns that bridge both ancient and modern times, including Mustafapasa, Avanos, Uçhisar, Göreme and Ürgüp. Regular airline and rail services are available from the Turkish capital of Ankara, and from the eastern metropolis of Istanbul to Kayseri, the largest city close to the most frequently visited sites in Cappadocia.

Cappadocia, known also as the 'land of beautiful horses', presents a kaleidoscope of varied activities. Millions of years of erosion carved extensive caves in the soft sedimentary rock, and its earliest dwellers transformed these natural phenomena into homes, churches and other useful areas that constitute underground cities. In Göreme, the waters left impressive formations, such as minarets, soaring pillars of stone, and spectacular chimneys wrought by the hand of nature. Recorded history conveys stories of inhabitants of the region dating to Roman times, and their legacy brings thousands to Cappadocia each year. Accommodation is readily available, and a number of unique cave hotel options are reasonably priced.

Erosion, active from three to nine million years ago, also created the Cappadocian moonscape, a spectacle like nothing else on Earth. Such vistas are a short distance from several towns in the region. Travellers typically enjoy the monasteries and painted cave churches of the Göreme Valley, horseback riding across the countryside, hiking along the network of trails, and even a thrilling hot-air balloon ride to observe the landscape in an unparalleled panorama.

Full-day excursions are common in Cappadocia, and guided tours are recommended. Visitors can choose from several that include the 'fairy chimneys' in the Devrent and Pasabag valleys, the Göreme Open-Air Museum, Uçhisar Castle, the Derinkuyu and Kaymakli underground cities, and Anatolian churches. Göreme National Park and the underground cities are designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites. The Göreme Open-Air Museum is one of the most famous attractions in all of Turkey and among the most visited of Cappadocia's monastic community attractions. Dating from the 9th and 11th centuries, more than 30 churches and other centres of worship carved from the sedimentary rock are accessible at the museum, and several contain beautiful frescoes.

Ecologically minded travellers can find tours, activities and hotels that are environmentally aware, leaving minimal impact on the ancient beauty and timeless monuments of nature found in this striking location.

Essential information

Public transportation is not recommended for sightseeing in Cappadocia. Make private arrangements for travel.

Best time to visit

June to October (for festivals and celebrations)

Time zone

UTC+3

CURRENCY
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TURKISH LIRA

Useful sites

CAPPADOCIA.TRAVEL
WWW.CAPPADOCIATURKEY.NET
WWW.HOTAIRBALLOONCAPPADOCIA.COM

Amsterdam

Uncover this beautiful canal city in the heart of the Netherlands

As you disembark the train at Amsterdam Centraal and make your way to the front of the beautiful 19th-century building, there's a whole city full of history and culture waiting to be explored. Perhaps you've got a week, or maybe just a short break, it doesn't matter – there's more than enough to keep you occupied. The most difficult decision you'll have is where to go first.

It's probably important to get the lay of the land first, and while a map can be great for this, there's a better option. Once you've left Amsterdam Centraal, head left and take a walk along Stationsplein and then Oosterdokskade until you come across Openbare Bibliotheek Amsterdam. While this is the city library, there's a restaurant on the top floor with a balcony that provides stunning views of Amsterdam on a clear day, with a handy map of the skyline. You'll be able to spot both Oude Kerk and Nieuwe Kerk (churches), and admire the traditional Dutch gable houses that make Amsterdam so iconic.

The first tourist destination most people head to is Dam Square, and there's a reason for that. While it has a Madame Tussauds on one side, it's also home to the Nationaal Monument and, perhaps more excitingly, Amsterdam's royal palace, Koninklijk Paleis. Entrance to the palace is only about £8.60 ($11) for adults, and it's a chance to take a walk through the Netherlands' rich royal history. Dam Square is also near to the Red Light District, which highlights the liberal culture of the city and is certainly worth a visit.

But Amsterdam's past isn't only known for its royalty – the city used to be home to artists aplenty, and a trip to Museumplein (Museum Square) is a must for any art or art-history lover. Dominating the area is the Rijksmuseum, a Dutch national museum that houses works created by Rembrandt and Vermeer, among others. Of course, a quick stroll past the water feature (which incidentally is perfect to dip your feet into on a hot day) will find you at the Van Gogh Museum, which holds the largest collection of Van Gogh paintings in the world. However, if modern art is more your style, then take a trip to the nearby Stedelijk Museum.

Of course, Amsterdam also has a darker history, and the person probably most famously associated with it is Anne Frank. The youngest in a Jewish family, she, her sister and her parents fled Nazi Berlin for Amsterdam. When the Nazis invaded the Netherlands, they went into hiding in an attic on Prinsengracht, but they were betrayed a few years later. After being sent to concentration camps, only Anne's father, Otto, survived. The attic is now open to the public, and walking through the concealed entrance to the hiding space is a harrowing experience. The floorboards creak underfoot – it's hard to imagine how still the family and their fellow fugitives had to stay to avoid detection.

You'll find cheese shops all over the city, and many offer free samples

The Anne Frank House can have long queues, so it's worth booking your slot ahead of time

ADMIRE THE DUTCH GABLE HOUSES THAT MAKE AMSTERDAM SO ICONIC

Be sure to head down some of the alleys when you explore the city

There's more to Amsterdam than its history. The lifeblood that flows through the city are the canals, arranged in an ever-expanding horseshoe. There are plenty of companies running boat tours up and down the canals, and it's a great opportunity to see some of the beautiful Dutch architecture, as well as scope out where you want to go next. But connecting all the canals is the Amstel, the river after which the beer is named. If you're after a little of the beverage, head over to the Heineken Experience on Stadhouderskade for a tour of the brewery and a tasting at the end.

One thing you'll spot a lot of are the cheese shops – it seems like they're on every corner. If you want a gift to take home to family and friends, this is perfect. Inside you'll find brightly wrapped Dutch cheeses that are smoked, infused with pesto and more. You'll also be able to buy your stroopwafels here – caramel waffles that go very well with a good cup of coffee.

That brings us to food. You'll find every type of cuisine imaginable here – it's a city, after all – but it can be good to stray a little from the centre of the city where things are geared more towards tourists. Out in the suburbs you can eat like a local, although central Amsterdam will still be good for your crêpes, fries and bagels.

If you're eating on the go, or you'd just like a break from the hustle and bustle of the city,

TRAVELLING IN AMSTERDAM

Transport is the first thing you might worry about it, especially if your accommodation seems like a long trek away after being on a train or plane. Amsterdam has taken the stress out of travel, though; you just need to hop over the road to the tourist information office to get yourself a travel card that will give you unlimited travel for one, two or three days, costing around £15 ($20), £20 ($25) and £25 ($31) respectively. The trams are so easy to navigate – there are stops all over the city and out into the suburbs – and your ticket will also allow you unlimited use of the metro while it's valid, too. However, if you want to travel like a local, you'll find bikes to rent all over the city.

Trams run all over the city centre

There is so much to do in this bustling city – you won't get bored!

Amsterdam is more than ready to provide. Dotted around the city you'll find glorious parks, each offering a slice of peace. The most famous is probably Vondelpark, in the southeast, and it has some beautiful small lakes. You may even stumble upon a free concert in the spring or summer months. Elsewhere, there's Rembrandtpark (near Rembrandtplein), Westerpark, Amstelpark and Oosterpark, as well as ARTIS, Amsterdam's zoo.

If you somehow run out of things to do in Amsterdam, there's no need to worry – the city is well connected, and you can jump on a train and head all over the country. The Hague is only half an hour or so away, along with Rotterdam, Dordrecht and Utrecht. You can also head over the border and into Germany or Belgium, which can come in handy if you're wanting to embark on a tour of Europe, or just the Benelux area.

But Amsterdam is a beautiful city, and there's so much to do there that filling your holiday shouldn't be all that difficult. With culture, history and food aplenty, you're bound to leave feeling like you're flying high.

Amsterdam is known for its architecture and beautiful canals

Essential information

Be careful when walking in Amsterdam – bikes can appear in front of you out of nowhere!

Best time to visit

All year round

Time zone

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

Useful sites

WWW.IAMSTERDAM.COM/EN
WWW.AMSTERDAMPASS.COM
EN.GVB.NL/AMSTERDAM-TRAVEL-TICKET

St Moritz

Discover the birthplace of Alpine tourism in this chic Swiss mountain resort

Winter tourism only really started in St Moritz as the result of a bet. In 1864, a hotel owner made a wager with four British summer visitors to the spa resort that they would equally enjoy a stay in the chilly throes of winter. Return they did, quickly spreading the word among their friends and kick-starting the transformation of the Swiss Alps into a glitzy year-round destination, its small streets changing as top-class restaurants and exclusive designer shops moved in.

St Moritz has done more than any other place to establish snow and ice as a sporting arena. The town was the location of the second Winter Olympics in 1928 and became the first repeat host in 1948. It was also the venue of Europe's first curling tournament, the first European Ice-Skating Championship, and the first bobsleigh club. Most modern visitors choose to spend their days on the slopes with boots clipped into skis or a snowboard. With 350 kilometres (217 miles) of pistes across four sectors, there are runs to suit every level of ability; from novices on the school slopes to wannabe racers hurtling down black runs used in the Ski World Championship, last held here in 2017.

Those who want to experience the ultimate icy thrill can book a session at the Cresta Run, the oldest skeleton track in the world. Its 1.2-kilometre (0.75-mile) length is cut anew from the ice every winter, and the only way to ride it is by lying prone and hurtling head-first down the ravine on a small sledge. Aspirant Lizzy Yarnolds are welcomed by the members of the St Moritz Tobogganing Club, who allow complete beginners to their practice sessions.

St Moritz may now be best known as a winter destination, but it retains the summer charms that first drew Victorian vacationers. With more than 300 days of sunshine every year, some prefer to time their visit when the snow has melted. Many summer travellers are just as active as the winter visitors, using the steep slopes for hiking and mountain biking. Others choose to remain in the comfortable embrace of a five-star hotel. St Moritz has the 'big five' five-star venues to choose from: Badrutt's Palace, Carlton Hotel, Kempinski Grand Hotel des Bains, Kulm Hotel and Suvretta House. Anyone resting their head in one of these establishments will find themselves treated like royalty.

Summer is a particularly good time for visiting the wooden cabin made famous in the 1952 film *Heidi*, which is located a pleasant hike from the town centre; while Lake St Moritz and Lake Maloja are a beautiful shade of aquamarine in the summer months. Back in town, don't miss St Moritz's leaning tower, with an incline that surpasses even that of the more famous leaning tower in Pisa.

Whether you're into ski or après ski, adrenaline or absolute relaxation, St Moritz is the exclusive resort that gave birth to the Alps as a tourist destination, and has yet to be surpassed. Sometimes the original is still the best.

Snow combines with sunshine to make St Moritz a winter playground

Essential information

Ditch the rental car; parking is limited in St Moritz, but it is well served by public transport.

Best time to visit

December to March or June to October

Time zone

UTC+1

CURRENCY

₣

SWISS FRANC

Useful sites

STMORITZ.COM/EN
STMORITZGUIDE.COM
STMORITZTRAVELPLANNER.COM

Whales and dolphins can be spotted off the coast of the Azores all year round

Essential information

Travel between the islands by ferry instead of air for cheaper fares and impromptu whale watching.

Best time to visit

July to August

Time zone

UTC -1

CURRENCY

€

EURO

Useful sites

WWW.VISITAZORES.COM
WWW.AZORES.COM
WWW.AZORESCHOICE.COM

The Azores

From hot springs to high-octane adventures, Portugal's archipelago has something for everyone

While the Aegean and Balearic Islands might be more frequently visited by tourists, a trip to the Azores can offer variety and excitement for a fraction of the cost.

Hopping between these nine characterful volcanic islands allows you to experience everything that the Azores have to offer. Whether you prefer leisurely ambling around historic towns or hightailing through volcanic vistas on an adventure tour, these colourful destinations deliver memorable experiences at every turn.

Most journeys through the Azores begin on its largest island, São Miguel. Nicknamed 'the green island' (ilha verde) for its abundance of natural beauty, this is a land where volcano biking tours can be interspersed with luxurious dips in the naturally heated waters of thermal springs and serene walks around hydrangea-lined calderas.

Sete Cidades is a particular highlight, with 12 kilometres (7.5 miles) of trails bordering two impressive lakes. It's said that these waters contain the tears of two lovers – a green-eyed princess and a blue-eyed shepherd, whose forbidden romance and reluctant separation led to the formation of lakes matching the colours of their eyes.

Elsewhere on São Miguel, it's worth spending some time in Ponta Delgada, the Azores' largest city and economic capital. Immerse yourself in the local culture while you meander between bars and restaurants, sampling affordable plates of petiscos (Portuguese tapas) and cocktails while bobbing along to the beat of live bands.

Ponta Delgada happens to be an ideal base for some of São Miguel's best day trips. A 20-minute westward drive will take you to Caldeira Velha, a waterfall and hot spring where you can take a dip in the surrounds of jungle-like foliage. After your geothermal bath, continue west to Furnas and try the local delicacy, Cozido das Furnas, a meaty stew cooked using volcanic steam.

You can easily fill a holiday with the fun that's to be had on São Miguel, but doing so means missing out on the Azores' eight other bountiful islands. Santa Maria is the southernmost, boasting warm weather and beautiful beaches. If you plan on visiting in August, be sure to stick around for Portugal's oldest music festival, Maré de Agosto.

Angra do Heroísmo is among the most impressive historic attractions on the island of Terceira. The whole city is classified as a UNESCO World Heritage Site – you can easily spend a day here marvelling at the architecture of palaces, churches and museums dotted around its patterned streets.

The Azores is one of the best locations in the world for whale watching. Guided tours are available throughout the islands, but Faial features some of the most renowned ones. Board a boat in Horta and keep an eye out for some of Earth's biggest beasts, including sperm whales and blue whales.

Weather in the Azores can be unpredictable. While generally mild, the archipelago's oceanic climate can result in clouds and rain throughout the year. Bring a raincoat along with your bathing suit to ensure you're equipped to handle whatever the islands throw at you.

06

Tuscany

Art, culture and history abound in Tuscany, the picturesque home of the Italian Renaissance

Tuscany epitomises Italy's long-standing reputation for art, architecture and food in its many charming cities and towns.

Artistic tradition plays a leading role in Tuscany's identity. Florence is often regarded as the birthplace of the Renaissance; works by artists such as Michelangelo and Raphael are on display throughout its many museums. The most notable of these is the Uffizi. Allow yourself a day to marvel at the masterpieces in this world-renowned gallery, from Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus* to Leonardo da Vinci's *Annunciation*.

Other artistic must-visits in Florence include the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo, Museo degli Argenti and Galleria dell'Accademia. The latter of these is home to Michelangelo's *David*, one of the most famous statues in the world. Book tickets for these popular attractions in advance to avoid lengthy queues.

Just over an hour's drive from Florence is Siena, whose most famous artists include Duccio and Simone Martini. The medieval city is a work of art in itself: its majestic cathedral (known locally as Duomo di Siena) is the result of a century-spanning collaboration between Italy's most prestigious architects and artists; while the Piazza del Campo provides a stunning spot to grab coffee or aperitivo while basking in the radiance of buildings like the Palazzo Pubblico and Torre del Mangia.

Speaking of food and drink, Tuscany offers some of Italy's very best. While fine dining can be found in Michelin-starred restaurants such as Enoteca Pinchiorri in Florence and Bracali in Grosseto, you can easily experience the tastes of the region on a smaller budget.

Local specialities are often based on peasant traditions, and epitomised by the concept of 'cucina povera' – making the most of the best locally grown ingredients to produce hearty, rustic and affordable plates of food. Foodies would be wise to spend their trip touring the region in search of signature dishes associated with each city, town and village. Look out for Bistecca alla Fiorentina steak in Florence, pici pasta in Siena, pecorino cheese in Pienza, and world-renowned Tuscan extra virgin olive oil wherever you go.

Tuscany's most famous wine, Chianti, is a magnet for thousands of tourists each year (indeed, the region it is produced in has been teasingly nicknamed 'Chiantishire' for its high concentration of British visitors). Other reds worth sampling include Brunello di Montalcino and Vino Nobile di Montepulciano, while Vernaccia di San Gimignano is considered to be one of Italy's finest white wines.

To truly experience the traditions of Tuscan food, consider spending part of your trip on a residential farm, where you can meet the producers behind the region's best dishes. Those who'd like to take home the secrets of Italian cuisine can enrol in a cookery class, and learn to rustle up local favourites such as pappa al pomodoro or crostini with olives and paté.

The pioneering artisans of Tuscany have undoubtedly taken some of their inspiration from the breathtaking countryside that characterises the region. With winding roads, vineyards, hill towns and villages, adventures through this rural idyll are best savoured slowly, taking the time to enjoy everything that the area has to offer.

Keen walkers will want to head for the valley of Casentino, an area found north of Arezzo. Stay in the tiny town of Poppi, where a 13th-century fairy-tale castle towers over the landscape and provides an easy marker to look for on rambles around the countryside.

For more challenging hikes, set your sights on Alpi Apuane in the north of the region, where 600 kilometres (373 miles) of mountainous terrain can be explored via marked trails. Around 300 species of bird live among these lofty peaks, meaning twitchers will have plenty to keep their eyes occupied.

Looking for a postcard-perfect Instagram photo of a world-famous landmark? A trip to Tuscany is surely incomplete without stopping in

Vineyards can be spotted throughout the Tuscan landscape, particularly in Chianti

Essential information

Most restaurants in Tuscany stop serving lunch at around 2.30pm, so eat early to avoid disappointment.

Best time to visit

April to October

Time zone

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

Useful sites

WWW.DISCOVERTUSCANY.COM
LOVEFROMTUSCANY.COM
WWW.TUSCANYCHIC.COM

Medieval hill towns like Siena provide an ideal combination of history and natural beauty

> THE LIFESTYLE IN TUSCANY IS LAID BACK AND FRIENDLY, JUST LIKE ITS PEOPLE

Pisa, the city synonymous with its iconic Leaning Tower. The skew-whiff structure draws crowds throughout the year, so buy tickets in advance if you plan on climbing to the top. But don't let the tower-based hype detract from Pisa's other architectural triumphs – the Piazza dei Miracoli also includes a cathedral, baptistery, cemetery and museum, which are well worth a look.

Not all of Tuscany's cultural attractions are buildings and artworks. Some, such as the Palio di Siena, are events that carry with them the full weight of Tuscan tradition. This dramatic urban horse race dates back to 1644, with ten bareback horses and riders representing Siena's numerous contrade (city wards). Although the race typically lasts less than 90 seconds, its worldwide appeal means hotels become booked up months in advance. Plan your visit ahead of time if you want to witness the spectacle, which takes place twice every summer (on 2 July and 16 August).

For a quieter escape, the picturesque Monti Dell'Uccellina (Mountains of the Little Bird) are hard to beat. Wooded mountains meet pristine beaches in a stretch of coastal scenery that remains largely unspoiled by tourism. Spend your time here enjoying nature while wandering between landmarks, such as the ruined Abbey of San Rabano and the towers of Castel Marino. If you're lucky, you might also spot some of the area's abundant wildlife, which includes deer and wild boars.

The lifestyle in Tuscany tends to be laid back and friendly, just like its people. Many Italian shops and businesses take a 'pausa pranzo' in the middle of the day (roughly between 1pm and 3.30pm), closing trade for a couple of hours to spend time relaxing with friends and family. To make up for lost profits, many shops stay open later in the evening, allowing you to indulge in retail therapy until 8pm before grabbing an evening meal.

Weather-wise, Tuscany experiences blazing heat in July and August. If you plan on visiting outside the summer months, bring layers to equip yourself for varied temperatures and the cooler climes of Tuscany's hills and mountains.

The city of Florence is often considered the birthplace of Renaissance art

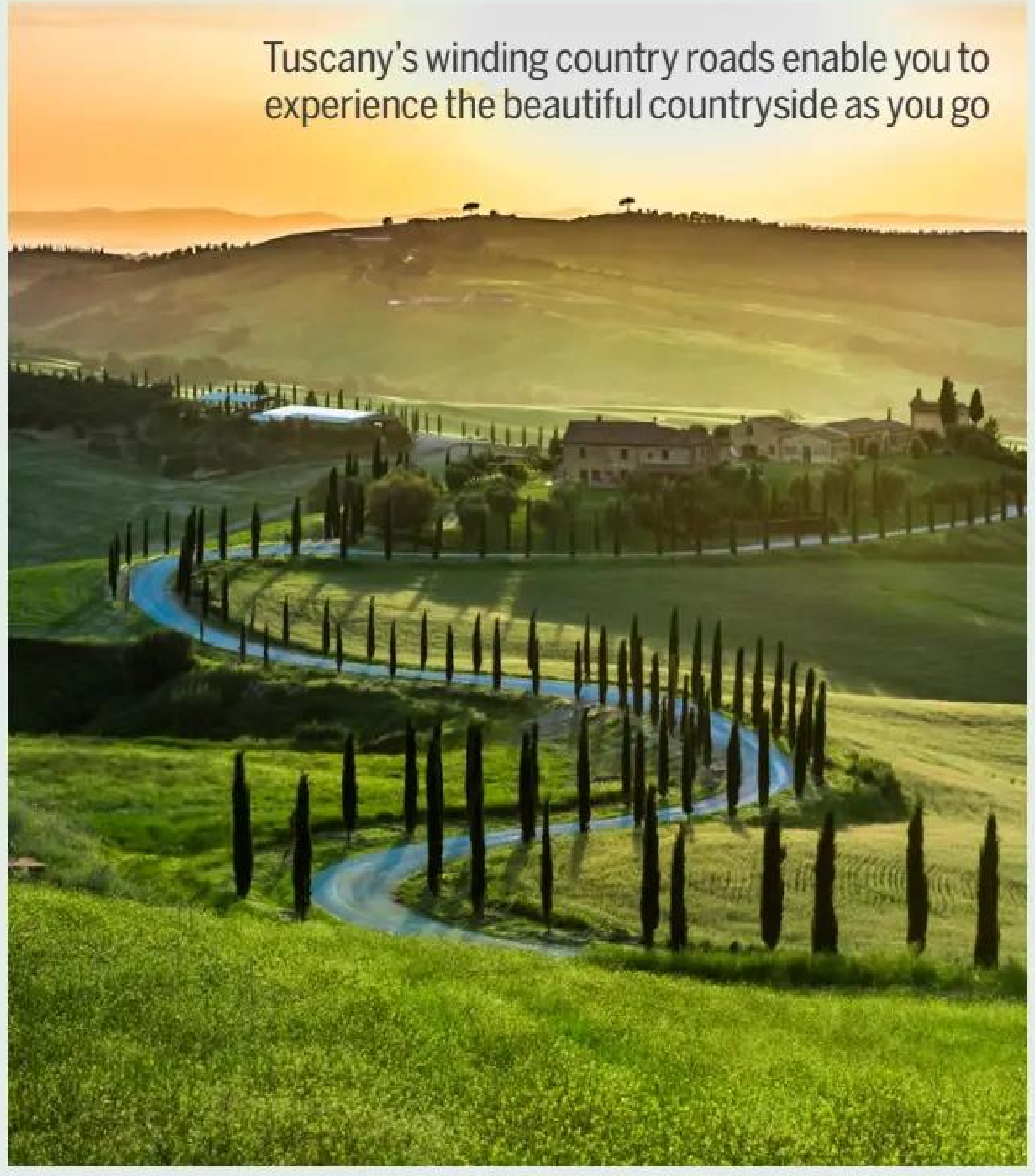
ROAD TRIP THROUGH TUSCANY

The best culture, art and food in Tuscany is all accessible by car, so renting a vehicle for a road trip through the region is a great idea.

Start your drive in Florence, the bustling regional capital and the place to be for Renaissance art fans. Allow a couple of days to explore the city's galleries, gardens and cathedral before driving west towards Poppi for walking and wine tasting, enjoying Tuscany's country views as you go.

From here you can take a detour through Arezzo on your way to Siena – both cities are excellent for sightseeing thanks to their abundance of historic monuments and impressive architecture.

Complete the road trip by visiting some of Tuscany's charming small towns – Monteriggioni, Colle di Val d'Elsa and San Gimignano are all worth the drive, and ideal places to seek out rustic Italian food made the local way.


Tuscany's winding country roads enable you to experience the beautiful countryside as you go

While it's definitely worth a look, there's more to Pisa than its famous Leaning Tower

Prague

Explore the stunning attractions of the Czech Republic's capital city

Prague is nicknamed the 'city of a hundred spires', but it doesn't take long before you realise this architectural gem, nestled within the Czech Republic and cut through by the Vltava River, cannot solely be defined by such a single set of features. Not withstanding the fact that it's factually incorrect – there are more than 1,000 spires, turrets, steeples and towers gently punching the air over this capital city – Prague can be anything to anyone: romantic, fashionable, artistic, bustling and quiet on the one hand; a foodie's paradise, eclectic watering hole or simply a chocolate-box feast for the eyes on the other.

Take a boat ride soon after you arrive and you can soak up the splendour of those medieval buildings, unspoiled by war and modern development, before putting your feet on firm ground in pursuit of the key attractions. Get your timing right and you'll be able to see the world's oldest working astronomical clock in action, a thing of beauty that dates back to 1410 and stands in the Old Town Square. A performance takes place every hour where four animated figures shake their heads to the ring of a bell while the 12 apostles filter past two open windows to the amazement of the massed crowds.

From there, you can make your way over to the Jewish Quarter, a historical area in which Jews were once restricted to living. There are six glorious synagogues, an old cemetery, the 18th-century Old Jewish Town Hall, and many monuments and artefacts that form the Jewish Museum in Prague. They can be seen by purchasing an entry ticket, and it's worth paying for the Old New Synagogue alone – it's Europe's oldest surviving and active synagogue, and steeped in legend.

Prague's compact nature means you can easily get around on foot. South of the Jewish Quarter is Charles Bridge, crossing the Vltava and enabling crowds to mass along a walkway some ten-metres (33-feet) wide. Construction of the bridge began in 1357, and it has seen numerous battles and natural disasters since then. Most notable here are 30 mostly Baroque statues and statuaries positioned across its length of 621 metres (2,037 feet). They're all replicas today, with the originals removed for safe keeping, but they're no less striking for it.

It certainly hasn't affected Prague's status as one of UNESCO's World Heritage Sites, and that's little wonder. Each twist and turn of Prague's narrow streets offers up copious delights, and while you'll be charged to visit many of the splendid attractions, there's plenty to do for free. Wandering the complex around Prague Castle, which contains the Bohemian Crown Jewels, will cost nothing (although entry will). There's also a huge, bronze horse statue (a monument to Hussite General Jan Žižka on Vitkov Hill, and free tours of the Rudolfinum concert hall.

Whatever you do, though, don't leave without visiting the New Town, in particular the politically iconic Wenceslas Square and the National Museum. Be sure to also sample the traditional Czech soup kulajda; the thin pancakes called palačinky; or vepřo-knedlo-zelo, which is roast pork, bread dumplings and stewed cabbage. Such food goes down well with beer, which is just as well since it is plentiful and cheap, and there are many breweries that encourage visitors. Just take it easy: with so much to see and do, you'll want a clear head come the morning, although a stroll around Letná Park may help – as long as you don't stop for a drink in its beer garden.

MUCHA
WARHOL exhibition
DALI
RESTAURANT CAFÉ U TÝNA
Mosaic
MATTONI
MATTONI
MATTONI
MATTONI

Church of Our Lady before Týn by the Old Town Square

Essential information

Watch out for currency scams offering 0% commission – and don't exchange on the streets of Prague!

Best time to visit

Spring and early autumn (for milder weather)

Currency

Kč
CZECH KORUNA

Time zone

UTC+1

Useful sites

WWW.PRAGUE.EU/EN
WWW.HRAD.CZ/EN
WWW.JEWISHMUSEUM.CZ/EN/INFO/VISIT

Visitors traverse a walkway between two of the 16 beautiful lakes at the Plitvice Lakes National Park in Croatia

Essential information

If taking a bus, ask the driver to stop at the park entrance prior to departing.

Best time to visit

Natural vistas change seasonally; July and August are peak months

Time zone

UTC+1

CURRENCY
kn
CROATIAN KUNA

Useful sites

NP-PLITVICKA-JEZERA.HR/EN
VISIT-CROATIA.CO.UK/CROATIA-DESTINATIONS/PLITVICE-LAKES
WHC.UNESCO.ORG/EN/LIST/98

Plitvice Lakes

The gathering of waters at the Plitvice Lakes of Croatia offers breathtaking beauty

The most popular tourist attraction in Croatia is the natural phenomenon of Plitviče Lakes, a wonder of waters where 16 lakes come together in stunning beauty. The Lakes, just 130 kilometres (81 miles) southwest of the Croatian capital city of Zagreb, are the main attractions in the Plitviče Lakes National Park, designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1979.

The national park covers 300 square kilometres (116 square miles), and includes shimmering turquoise waters with abundant flora and fauna. Cascading waterfalls connect the lakes in a resounding chorus, and invite visitors to linger and observe the sheer beauty of nature, where water has flowed for millions of years, creating a pristine marvel. Varied species of wildlife, including bears, birds, boars, wolves and deer, are also regular visitors to the life-sustaining waters. Hiking the trails throughout the park allows time to contemplate the natural setting or snap photographs of stunning vistas.

For those on a tight schedule, the Plitviče Lakes are worth the investment of a full day; however, many visitors choose to stay overnight and spend a bit more time exploring the lakes, waterfalls and hidden wonders. Be aware that crowds are common and trails may be congested at times. Still, for those with an adventurous spirit, the possibilities for discovery are endless.

Two entrances allow access to the park, one for the lower lakes and another for the higher lakes, which converge over a distance of eight kilometres (five miles). Wear comfortable shoes and take water, lunch or snacks to save time – and be prepared for a dramatic shift in altitude. The highest point in the park reaches 1,280 metres (4,200 feet), while the lowest point is 380 metres (1,247 feet). The largest waterfall is the legendary Veliki Slap, which descends 70 metres (230 feet) to the crystal pool below. For those who wish to sit and immerse themselves in the moment, or take a leisurely stroll and enjoy the natural beauty, rest areas are readily available.

A small train and several ferries operate daily within the confines of the park, transporting visitors throughout. A four-hour guided tour, available in English, German, Spanish, French, Italian and Croatian, may be booked ahead for a minimum of 15 people.

The park is open daily and offers extended hours during the summer months, typically between 7am and 8pm local time. Admission for adults is around £6.50 ($9), although prices do vary with the busy season, increasing from April to October. Admission is cheaper for children, and those under the age of seven are admitted free of charge. The cost of transportation inside Plitviče Lakes National Park is included in the admission fee.

Getting to Plitviče Lakes is straightforward. The nearest airports are located in Zagreb and Zadar, and car-rental facilities are available. Day tours from Croatia's larger cities are a frequently chosen option, and transportation is provided, while buses run regularly with affordable rates. Overnight accommodations may be booked with one of three affiliated hotels located just outside the park perimeter, or campsites and bungalows are available as well.

09

Lapland

Some things are only possible at the edge of the hospitable world, in Finland's adventure playground of Lapland

Near-mythical Lapland lives in the imagination. A world of extremes, its midnight sun surrenders to the polar night come November, and popular ski resorts make way for desolate subarctic wilderness. 'The lapin taika' or 'the magic of Lapland', is kept alive by the indigenous Sámi peoples, whose ancient singing, the trancelike yoik, is said to evoke the very essence of a person, animal or place. Silvery forests, wild reindeer and snow-laden fells add to the enchantment – as does Father Christmas, who 'officially' calls Lapland home. But perhaps most magical of all are the aurora borealis, or northern lights.

Vast and silent, Lapland's remoteness makes it a mecca for the most dedicated aurora chasers – though not all who search will bear witness to Mother Nature's sensational light show. Although visible from late August until mid April, the natural phenomenon is famously unpredictable. According to Sámi legend, the lights are the dancing souls of those who have passed away, and onlookers should refrain from pointing at them. Starting out slowly, green tendrils stretch across the inky sky, before bursting into dancing curtains of colour. These are joined by yellow and purple light, radiating from every direction, as snow sparkles underfoot, reflecting the sequined sky.

With sightings of the 'tricky lady' few and far between, Finnish Lapland is no less a winter wonderland. Come November, as the long winter sets in, the sun breathes its last breath and the polar night takes hold. The sun will not truly rise again until late January – instead, skirting just below the horizon, it will cast beautiful sunset shades of violet, blue and, at its brightest, pink.

Despite the short days, and relative darkness, the season is seen not as a time to lament the fallen sun, but one when the greatest memories are formed. From husky sledding and snowmobiling to skiing, snowshoe hiking and ice fishing, there are myriad ways to explore the magical icy tundra. When adventure has been had and exhaustion hits, long nights are spent exchanging stories and feasting on freshly caught salmon, roasted on a crackling fire.

For snow bunnies and thrill-seekers, Lapland's versatile ski resorts offer everything from to black runs to kids' slopes, with cross-country exploring aplenty for solitary souls. The 'big four' – Levi, Ylläs, Pyhä-Luosto and Ruka – on the fringes of Europe's largest wilderness, boast some of Lapland's prettiest pistes.

Levi is the most popular, with two snow parks, a variety of slopes and lively après-ski culture. Meanwhile, the twin resorts of Pyhä and Luosto are the most laid-back, famous for their picturesque backcountry and freeriding zones. But many argue that Ylläs, with its six fells, takes the crown as a keen skier's paradise. It's been luring visitors since 1957, when its first ski lift was opened. While floodlights keep many of the slopes open during the polar night, nature provides all the illumination one could hope for by February, until the snow melts around May.

PERHAPS MOST MAGICAL OF ALL ARE THE AURORA BOREALIS, OR NORTHERN LIGHTS

One of the world's largest carnivores, the Arctic polar bear can reach weights of up to 800kg (1,543lbs)

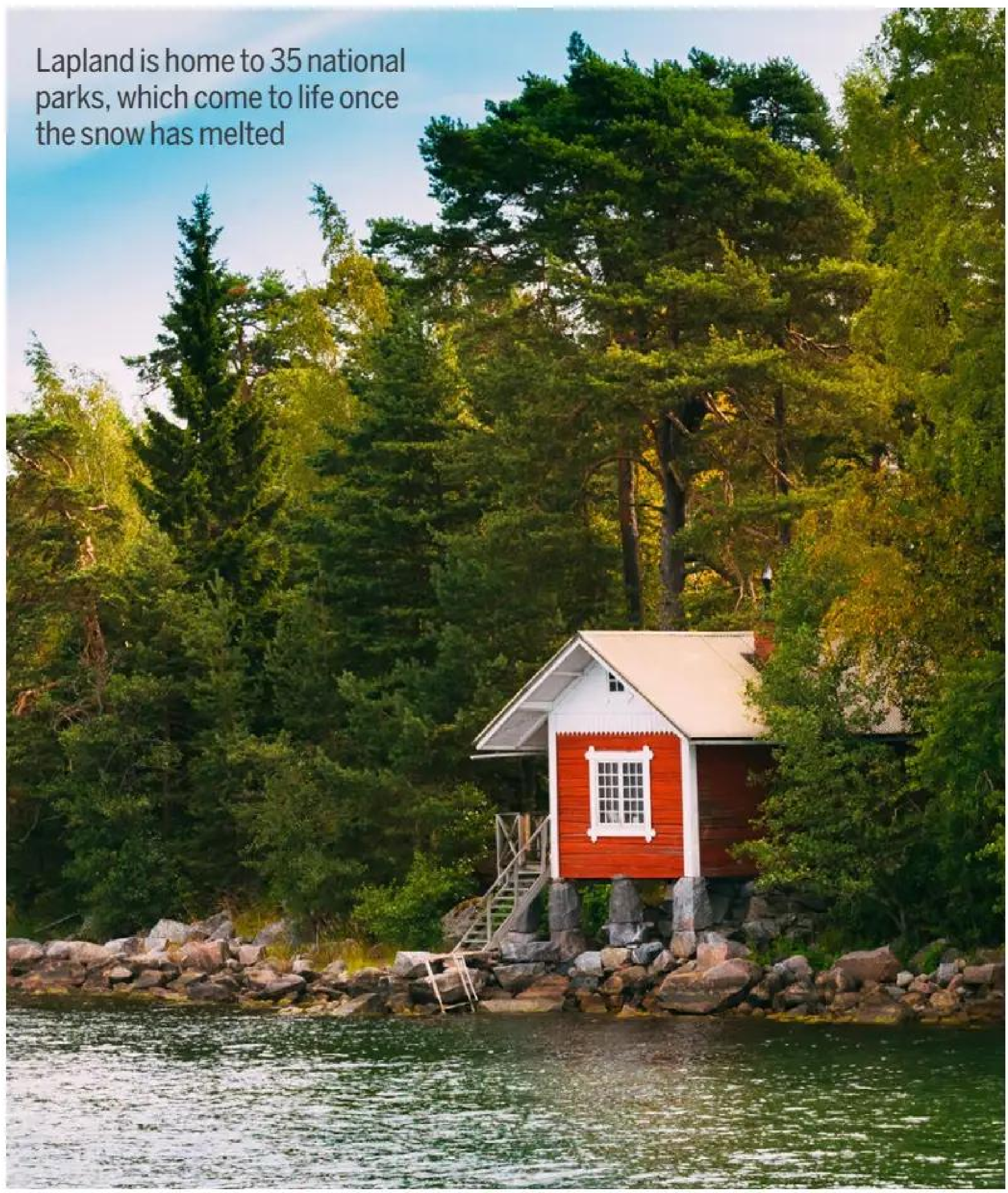
THE ARCTIC CIRCLE

The Arctic Circle sits at the periphery of the known world, stretching across the Arctic Sea, into Finland, Sweden, Norway, Russia, Denmark, Iceland, Canada and the United States. It is an unforgiving land, a land where migrating polar bears battle walruses for food in the summer, and survival in the winter.

Only the most resilient and well-adapted can live here, from the short 'twisted wood' krummholz, which live for hundreds of years, to the herbivorous reindeer and the Arctic tern – which migrates 19,000 kilometres (11,800 miles) between the two poles every year. It is the only region in the world where the wolf is not endangered, but thrives.

It takes a special breed of person to call the Arctic home, but many do – roughly four million to be precise, representing 40 ethnicities. Though cultures vary, like the polar bear they have all felt the encroaching hand of climate change and industrialisation.

Forget horsepower, huskies are renowned for their speed and endurance, running up to 25kph (16mph)



Lapland is home to 35 national parks, which come to life once the snow has melted

One in five Finns own a traditional holiday cottage, often equipped with a sauna

With the dark winter over, Lapland bursts into colour, before being bathed in 24-hour sunlight as the midnight sun ushers in a fitting contrast to the winter night. The long days and temperate weather call for hikes, horseback rides and canoeing.

Sprawling 285,550 hectares (705,609 acres) towards Norway's border, Lemmenjoki is Finland's largest national park. Endless pine forests, rugged fells and mirror-like rivers make it ideal hiking territory, as does the smattering of juicy berries, just waiting to be picked. It's also prime gold real estate, where solitary prospectors splash away with their pans.

West of Lemmenjoki National Park lies Inari village, the cultural heart of Sámi culture – home to its parliament, the Siida museum and a series of handicraft shops. From its position on the edge of Lake Inari, the country's largest, the ancient Sámi sacrificial site of Ukonsaari Island is a short boat ride away. Dedicated to Ukko, the god of thunder, people would travel to the isle to pray for favourable winds, making offerings to the deities. Even today, some locals still visit and flip a coin into the water, asking for the same.

Another natural marvel, Oulanka National Park features hanging bridges, crystal-clear waterfalls and a variety of hiking trails – some suitable for children, others requiring careful navigation up precarious rock walls. For adrenaline junkies, it's also home to category three, four and five rapids.

Arguably the easiest of Lapland's multi-day hikes, the 55-kilometre (34-mile) Hetta-Pallas Trail passes through Pallas-Yllästunturi National Park. The scenic route is dotted with quaint wilderness cabins, some with saunas, where weary travellers can rest their heads for the night.

Finland's eastern borderlands offer a unique opportunity to view the magnificent brown bear in its natural habitat, amid ancient coniferous forests, with honey buzzards circling overhead. Overnight stays in a cabin-like hide enable visitors to go unnoticed, so the bears are not disturbed, as they gorge on deer or elk.

They may be Santa's helper of choice, but reindeer are a staple of Finnish cuisine

Essential information

Purchase the Aurora Alert SMS service, which notifies visitors when the northern lights are visible.

Best time to visit

January to March (for winter sports and northern lights) or April to June (for summer adventure)

Time zone

UTC+2

CURRENCY
€
EURO

Useful sites

WWW.SANTACLAUSVILLAGE.INFO
WWW.NATIONALPARKS.FI
WWW.KAKSLAUTTANEN.FI

Santa Is Here
IITTALA OUTLET

With a selection of cabins, glass igloos and hotels, there is accommodation to suit every taste at Santa Claus Village

11

SANTA CLAUS VILLAGE

Located just eight kilometres (five miles) northeast of the city of Rovaniemi, Santa Claus Village sits at the centre of the Arctic Circle. The festive trip of children's dreams, it is the definitive place to rediscover the magic of Christmas.

First, visit Santa Claus himself, who is available every day of the year – even on Christmas Day. Then, meet Santa's furry friends for a sleigh ride, whether pulled by huskies or reindeer, and whizz through pine trees, along not-yet-frozen roads.

The children's activities continue with snowmobile safaris and the fantastical Snowman World. With appetites whet, visit the local reindeer farm, before retreating to the warmth of the traditional tepee for folkloric tales. Then, make your crossing into the Arctic Circle official with a customary Lapp ceremony, performed by enthusiastic reindeer herders. Before leaving, post some Christmas cards at the Santa Claus Main Post Office – stamped with the unique Arctic Circle postmark.

Menton is the French Riviera's own answer to Italy's Amalfi Coast, with its bold, colourful buildings dominating the seafront

The French

A dream location filled with sun and sand, the south of France has more to offer than just beaches

There are few places in the world as spectacular as the Côte d'Azur – the imposing Alpine mountains descend gracefully into fields of lavender and village-topped hills, eventually meeting the Mediterranean coastline. Here, along the southern shores of France, are some of the most striking vistas. It's also one of the most popular holiday destinations, with its balmy climes and slower pace attracting millions of people.

It's easy to understand why the south of France is so popular – it has absolutely everything to offer visitors, from beach retreats to country escapes, with skiing opportunities almost a stone's throw from the sandy shores. However, this breathtaking 'Blue Coast' has earned itself a reputation as a holiday destination for the wealthy elite – with all the snobbery and pretentiousness that come with such a status. This might be true for the coast's wealthy visitors, but to tar the region – and by connection, the residents – with the same brush would be a cruel jibe indeed. Regarded by many abroad as aloof and affected, the Riviera's inhabitants are in reality some of the most welcoming, keen to prove to tourists that this reputation is unfounded.

As well as being one of the best holiday spots in Europe, the French Riviera is incredibly easy to reach. The main airport serving the region is in Nice, the heart of the Côte d'Azur. From here, it's simple to get to every part of the coastline via bus, taxi or even helicopter if you're feeling particularly flush. Bus tickets cost about £1.30 ($1.70) per journey, while a helicopter transfer will set you back approximately £145 ($185).

Another popular way to reach the region is by driving. With its spectacular coastline, rolling hills and panoramic views over the Med, no driving tour of Europe is complete without a stop in the French Riviera before speeding off into Italy via the coastal road. Some of the landscapes you might encounter in the region may look strikingly familiar. La Grande Corniche shot to fame as a location in *To Catch a Thief*, as well the James

Essential information

If you're visiting the Riviera's coastal towns only, don't waste your money on a hire car. The region's public transport is excellent, reliable and cheap.

Best time to visit

April to October

Time zone

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

Useful sites

WWW.FRANCE.FR/EN/COTE-DAZUR
EN.NICETOURISME.COM
WWW.FRENCHRIVIERA-TOURISM.COM

Riviera

Bond film starring Pierce Brosnan, *GoldenEye*. They might be stunning routes, but don't let the scenery distract you because the roads are littered with sharp bends – Grace Kelly's car famously plummeted off a cliff road in Monaco.

Regardless of where you choose to spend your holiday in the French Riviera, everything worth visiting is within a short trip. The south of France's public transport system is excellent, with buses running across the entire coastline, as well as up into the hills and further inland. Likewise, the region is served by a regular train service – trains to the bigger stops run every 20 minutes and cost very little.

The city of Nice is certainly the region's beating heart, not just because it serves as most people's entry to the French Riviera, but because it embodies the very essence of the French Riviera. With its glorious coastline, thriving city and bustling old town, Nice is an essential port of call for any trip to the Riviera. As a city, Nice proves that life along the Med goes on as normal – but with that charmingly laid-back French attitude. Where Parisians sit in cafés and watch the world go by, the Niçois head down to the promenade, enjoying the slower pace of life. To really experience the Riviera lifestyle, be sure to take the time to sit and relax on or by the beach, watching the waves as they tumble towards you.

Like many of France's cities, Nice is a twisting maze of quaint streets, but with a Mediterranean slant. For panoramic views over the famous red-tiled roofs, take a leisurely walk up to Castle Hill. If you'd rather stay in the shade, why not take a wander around Nice's Old Town? The historic quarter is peppered with charming cafés and restaurants, as well as a wealth of spectacular markets to browse. Except for Mondays, the markets run every day – head down to Cours Saleya for an authentic experience, and pick yourself up some quintessentially Niçois produce.

If you're more interested in visiting the city's museums, it's worth popping into the Musée Matisse. Having made his home in the region, Matisse's legacy is hugely celebrated by the area, and the museum holds one of the largest collections of his work. Round the corner from the museum is a serene monastery dating back to the 800s, with a spectacular garden.

The sleepy town of Villefranche-sur-Mer is quiet but beautiful

> CROSSING OVER INTO MONTE-CARLO IS A COMPLETE CULTURE SHOCK

Bordering the city is the beautiful town of Villefranche-sur-Mer. A sleepy community nesting on the coast, Villefranche is popular with tourists for its small, quiet beaches and peaceful streets. Coming from the hustle and bustle of Nice, Villefranche is a haven of tranquillity. Here, spend your morning sunning yourself on the beaches, and in the afternoon head inland for some refreshments. If you're feeling adventurous, you can hire a boat from the harbour – the smaller ones can be taken into the harbour with no experience, but if you're after something a little more domineering you'll either need a sailing qualification, or you'll have to hire a skipper from the rental company.

Further towards the Italian border is the medieval town of Èze. Get the train into Èze-sur-Mer and either catch a bus or walk up the steep incline to the hillside town. If you're tired of beaches, a day trip to Èze is the perfect remedy. Not only a historic site, Èze is also home to a celebrated botanic garden. This charming little town is popular with tourists and honeymooners, but despite how crowded it can get, it's easy to see why people fall in love with it. Small boutiques line the streets, selling everything from lavender grown in nearby Provence, to art prints of the region. From Èze you can experience awe-inspiring views over the Mediterranean.

No trip to the French Riviera would be complete without a visit to Monaco. Once a possession of France, Monaco gained its independence in the 15th century, and remains independent to this day, although agreements with France mean that the larger nation is responsible for the smaller state's defence. Despite being the second-smallest country in the world (after Vatican City), Monaco has a rich history and wealth of attractions to offer visitors. In the old town stands the Prince's Palace, home to the Monégasque monarchy. A changing of the guards outside the palace's entrance attracts thousands of visitors daily, so it's worth arriving with plenty of time to spare – it kicks off at 11.55am precisely, and crowds can get pushy. If you'd rather avoid the scuffle outside the palace, head down into the Old Town's streets, where there are dozens of quaint cafés, restaurants and shops. Not far from the historical quarters, you'll find the Saint Nicholas Cathedral, the venue of Grace Kelly's fairy-tale wedding to Prince Rainier III of Monaco. The church is also the final resting place of the Grimaldis, Monaco's ruling dynasty. Entrance is free to the cathedral, but you'll be refused entry if you bare your shoulders, so ensure you have something to cover up with.

Not all of Monaco is as historic and serene, however. Crossing over into Monte-Carlo is a complete culture shock. Here, flaunting your wealth isn't a faux-pas; it's actively encouraged – after all, this is the playground of the rich and famous. Streets are lined with Lamborghinis, harbours are crammed with yachts, and cream-linen-suited men with Rolexes parade down the streets. In this otherworldly side of town, the casinos lure in visitors, particularly the world-famous Monte-Carlo casino. Entry into the building is free, but if you plan to enter the casino itself, there is an entrance fee to pay. On this side of town, prices are more than a little inflated, so be prepared to pay above the odds for anything from souvenirs to drinks. If you'd rather save your money – or even if you're more than happy to splurge – it's always worth taking a walk along the marina. Filled with hundreds of yachts, it's certainly an experience to see these super boats in the flesh, especially when you consider that most of the owners pay thousands to moor there – per night!

If you would rather experience something a little more down to earth, head further down the coast towards Italy. Here, on the Franco-Italian

Home to some of the wealthiest people in the world, Saint-Tropez retains its fishing-village charm

SAINT-TROPEZ

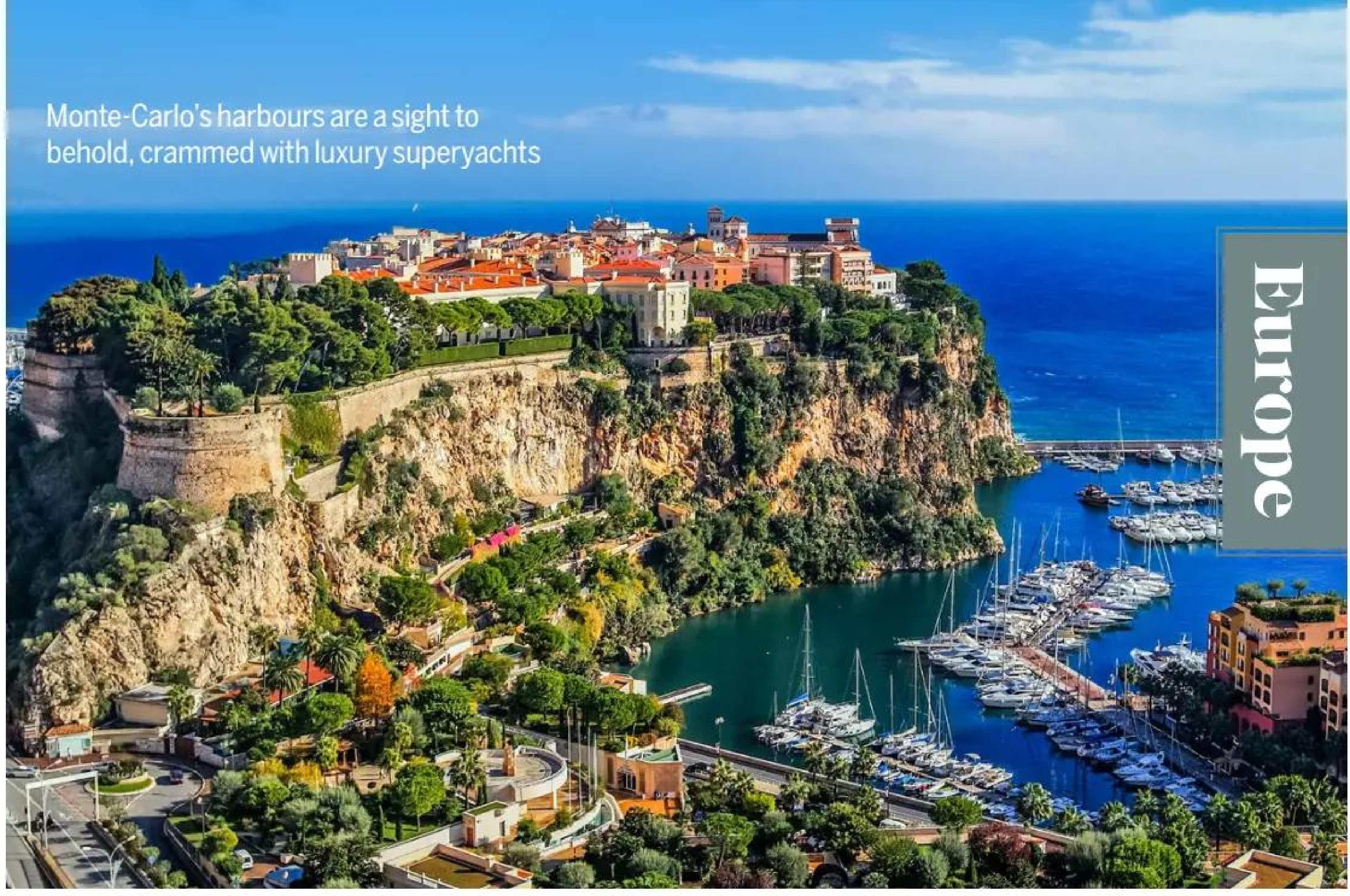
13

A charmingly quintessential French seaside town, Saint-Tropez hardly looks like the home of choice for the world's biggest jet-setters, but that's exactly what it is. Once a historic fishing town, Saint-Tropez soared to fame as a glamorous destination in the early 20th century, when stars like Coco Chanel summered there. But despite having this celebrity status, Saint-Tropez remains faithful to its humble roots.

At the Halle aux Poissons, a daily morning fish market is held, fish caught merely hours before sold to locals and restaurants alike.

Once the market closes up, head further inland to the Maritime History Museum, an old 17th-century fortress that is now home to the local museum. Entry is cheap at £2.60 ($3.30), and it boasts incredible views over the inlet. If you want to indulge in some people-watching, head back down to the Old Port, where fishing boats moor alongside yachts.

With its winding, medieval streets, Èze is popular with locals and tourists alike

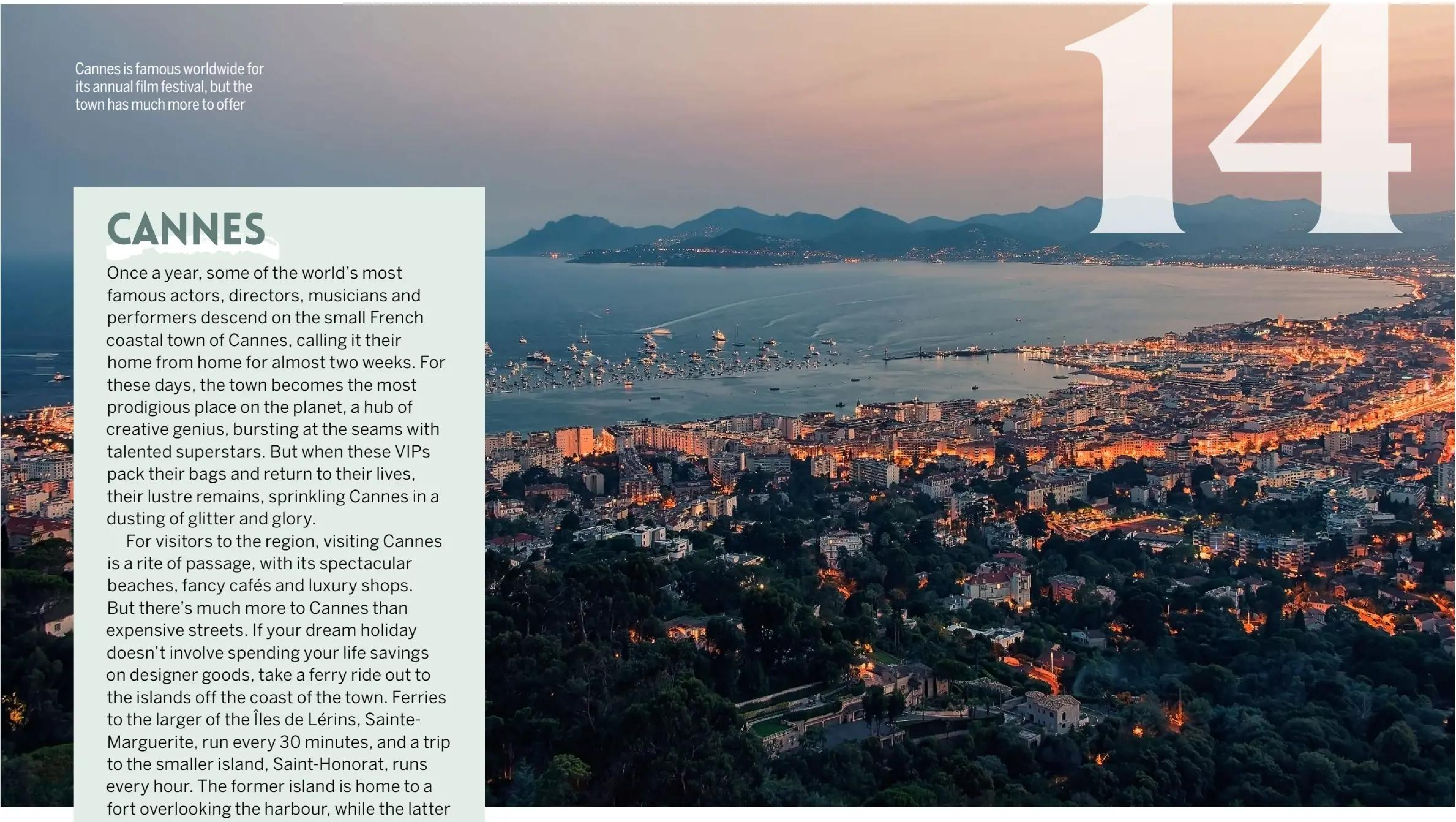


Monte-Carlo's harbours are a sight to behold, crammed with luxury superyachts

border, sits a little town called Menton. The French answer to the Amalfi Coast, Menton is filled with multi-coloured buildings and beautiful church spires sprawling out towards the shores. From February to March, Menton is awash with citrus hues as the annual Fête du Citron – Lemon Festival – occurs. Over the course of two weeks, the town welcomes hundreds of thousands of visitors keen to celebrate the community's links to the bright-yellow fruit. As well as a parade, light shows are held and fireworks are lit in celebration. The Lemon Festival, which has been running since 1928, is now one of the most popular events in the French Riviera, after the Nice Carnival and the Grand Prix in Monaco.

Back in undisputed French territory, Antibes does little to dispel the myth that the French Riviera is exclusively for the rich and famous. Celebrated largely for its sandy beaches, Antibes has a host of private and free beaches to visit. Perhaps the most popular free one to visit is Plage de la Salis, its white sand giving it a tropical vibe. Like its neighbouring towns, Antibes also has a marina, home to some spectacular yachts. If you're an enthusiast, keep your eyes peeled for Dilbar, the world's largest superyacht, which can often be found moored here. Also like Nice, Antibes hosts local markets, with the Cours Masséna filling with artists, producers and cheesemakers. Spend some time exploring the market, picking up Provençal treats.

While the sheer number of beaches and luxury harbours might become a touch repetitive, there's one aspect of Riviera life that never fails to excite: the cuisine. France has long been championed as a master of food and drink, its cuisine synonymous with fine dining. While the south of France is no stranger to typical French cooking, it has its own take on food, mixing traditional food with Mediterranean charm. Perhaps the most famous French-Mediterranean hybrid is socca, a chickpea pancake. Usually served plain or with savoury garnishes, socca is the highlight of Riviera cuisine. Cheap, quick to eat and delicious, it's the perfect light lunch for anyone intending to spend the day relaxing on the beaches. In Nice's old town, a small restaurant called Chez Pipo has taken the crown for best socca in the region. Queues form quickly here, so be sure to arrive in good time to secure a table. To complement your traditional Riviera snack, order a carafe of rosé wine, the region's speciality wine.



Cannes is famous worldwide for its annual film festival, but the town has much more to offer

14

CANNES

Once a year, some of the world's most famous actors, directors, musicians and performers descend on the small French coastal town of Cannes, calling it their home from home for almost two weeks. For these days, the town becomes the most prodigious place on the planet, a hub of creative genius, bursting at the seams with talented superstars. But when these VIPs pack their bags and return to their lives, their lustre remains, sprinkling Cannes in a dusting of glitter and glory.

For visitors to the region, visiting Cannes is a rite of passage, with its spectacular beaches, fancy cafés and luxury shops. But there's much more to Cannes than expensive streets. If your dream holiday doesn't involve spending your life savings on designer goods, take a ferry ride out to the islands off the coast of the town. Ferries to the larger of the Îles de Lérins, Sainte-Marguerite, run every 30 minutes, and a trip to the smaller island, Saint-Honorat, runs every hour. The former island is home to a fort overlooking the harbour, while the latter island serves as a nature retreat with the odd monastery peppered across the land.

Vienna

Imperial palaces, Baroque streetscapes and artistic masterpieces define Austria's capital

Situated on the Danube River, this spectacular city has been home to some of the greatest minds, from Mozart and Beethoven to Sigmund Freud.

Much of the city's grandeur is a lasting legacy of the powerful Habsburg Monarchy. Schönbrunn Palace, their summer residence, is a must-see with its pristine gardens and stunning interiors. Take a quirky horse-drawn carriage through the beautiful gardens or wander around the tranquil fountains. Next to the palace you'll find Vienna's zoo, or Tiergarten Schönbrunn, which is home to red pandas, jaguars, tigers and so much more – if you get the Vienna Pass, both the Zoo and Palace are included.

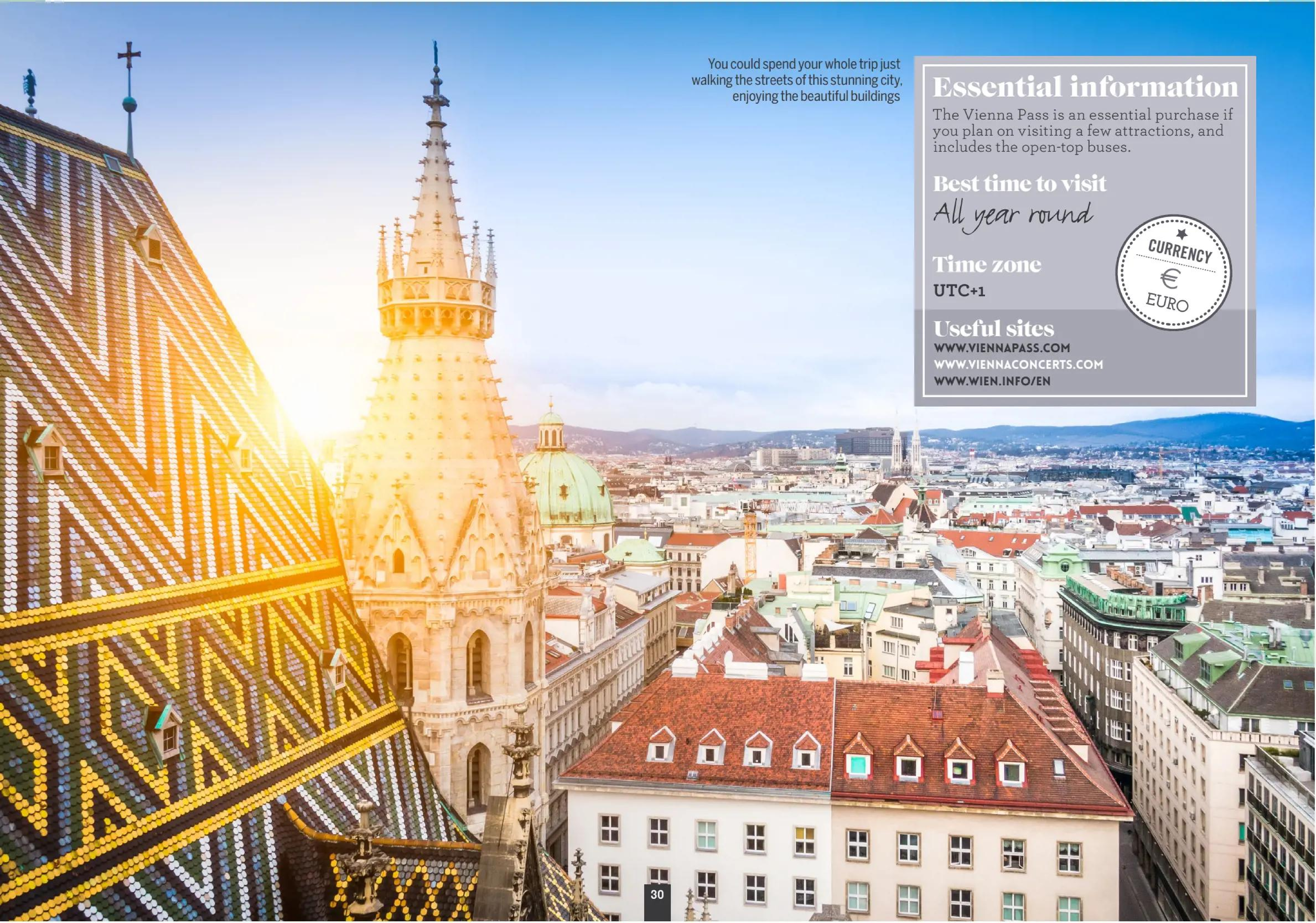
In the centre of the city you will find the Vienna State Opera House (Wiener Staatsoper), which is one of the leading opera houses in the world. Each season, the state opera house offers around 350 performances of more than 60 different operas and ballets, from world-class artists to the permanent ensemble who perform various operas, including *Cinderella* and *Giselle*. Get dressed up and spend an evening at the opera for a truly Viennese evening of opulence and sophistication. Tickets for the opera can start as low as £11 ($14.50), so it is definitely worth going for the experience, even if you don't think opera is your thing – you might be surprised. Each seat has a small screen with English subtitles to help you follow along if you don't speak the language, too.

The Spanish Riding School is another must for any trip to Vienna. Even if you just take a wander through the stunning buildings where it is situated and catch a tiptoed glance at the training arena, you won't be disappointed. The Spanish Riding School is the only institution in the world that has practised for more than 450 years. There are various tours and events that you can buy tickets for, from the morning training sessions to more lavish shows – it's a worthwhile and unique experience.

The city's museum quarter (Museumsquartier) features the Leopold Museum, with its numerous works by Schiele; the popular Museum of Contemporary Art; and the Kunsthalle, which is an array of restaurants, cafes and bars that make this area of the city an essential part of your trip.

If you get bored of the bigger museums and galleries, then why not venture to the Sigmund Freud Museum? The permanent exhibition is located in the former living quarters and office of Freud, and is a presentation of the great mind's life and work. From March 2019 until 2020, the museum will be closed for construction in order to preserve original details, but you will still be able to visit the Moving Freud Museum just a few steps away from the original premises.

Vienna is known for its sumptuous coffeehouse culture, where decadent coffee is served on silver trays alongside delicate cakes and sweet treats. You can't visit Vienna without trying Sachertorte, which is a chocolate cake created by Franz Sacher in 1832 for Prince Wenzel von Metternich in Vienna. The chocolate cake has a layer of apricot jam in the middle, and is topped with a shimmering chocolate glaze. It is one of the most famous Viennese culinary specialities. If sweet treats and creamy coffee aren't for you, head to a traditional pub and enjoy a Wiener schnitzel or warming goulash washed down with a stein of beer.



You could spend your whole trip just walking the streets of this stunning city, enjoying the beautiful buildings

Essential information

The Vienna Pass is an essential purchase if you plan on visiting a few attractions, and includes the open-top buses.

Best time to visit

All year round

Time zone

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

Useful sites

WWW.VIENNAPASS.COM
WWW.VIENNACONCERTS.COM
WWW.WIEN.INFO/EN

The Cliffs of Moher in County Clare is Ireland's most-visited natural attraction

Essential information

Safety first! Watch your step and be wary of the cliff edge here.

Best time to visit

June to August

Time zone

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

Useful sites

CLIFFSOFMOHER.IE
WWW.IRELAND.COM/EN-GB/AMAZING-PLACES/CLIFFS-OF-MOHER
BURRENGEOPARK.IE

Cliffs of Moher

Sweeping panoramic vistas of sea and shoreline greet visitors to Ireland's Cliffs of Moher

The trek to the Cliffs of Moher in County Clare on the western coast of Ireland takes the traveller to one of the world's most inspiring places. Through millions of years, as the green countryside meets the pounding surf of the Atlantic Ocean, nature has carved a breathtaking panorama of sheer rock and seemingly endless seas stretching to the limitless horizon.

The cliffs are named after an old fortress known as Mothar, or Moher, that once dominated their southern reaches. They soar 214 metres (702 feet), while extending eight kilometres (five miles) along the coast at the southwestern edge of Ireland's Burren region, from Hag's Head in the south to beyond O'Brien's Tower in the north. The tower, built in 1835 by Sir Cornelius O'Brien, is a familiar man-made landmark, constructed by the local businessman who wanted to spur tourism to boost the local economy. Along with the vantage point of the cliffs, the tower offers extensive vistas of the Twelve Pins and Maumturks mountain ranges in County Galway to the north, the Aran Islands in Galway Bay to the west, and southward to Loop Head.

Among the most-visited sites in Ireland, the Cliffs of Moher, named a part of the UNESCO Global Geopark, welcome about 1.5 million travellers each year, captivating them with unparalleled natural beauty. There is a variety of animal species here, including birds such as Atlantic puffins that nest on Goat Island, peregrine falcons, kittiwakes and more, along with whales, dolphins and other marine life. Rare flora includes Sea Pink and Cat's-ear, along with other abundant blooming species. Ancient stories of the cliffs abound in local lore, enchanting those who stop to listen, and bringing the vibrant history of the area to life.

An ecologically oriented visitor centre opened in 2007 and rests within the crook of a hillside to minimise its profile across the verdant landscape. The Cliffs of Moher virtual tour is an unforgettable 360-degree experience, and audio guides and maps are readily available. Admission is about £7 ($9) per adult, and visitors under 16 years of age are admitted free of charge. The visitor centre is open daily, except at Christmas, usually from 9am to 9pm local time. Two trails lead from the centre, and multiple entry points have been opened along the cliffside. Visitors are asked to exercise caution and stay on the official trail, which is set back a bit from the edge for safety reasons. The unofficial trail runs closer to the edge but is indeed more treacherous. Three primary viewing platforms – the main at Hag's Head, the north at Knockardakin and the south near the puffin colony's home – are within reasonable walking distance of the visitor centre.

Taking advantage of regular air service to Dublin, visitors may wish to rent a car, enjoy the 270-kilometre (170-mile) drive from the capital city to the Cliffs of Moher, sample the local fare in an authentic Irish pub, and find affordable lodging located in the surrounding area. Buses run a daily schedule to nearby towns such as Doolin, Lisdoonvarna, Galway, Ennis and Kinvara.

16

Venice

Navigate the unique waterways of Italy's City of Bridges

Venice is known throughout the world as the City of Canals, among many other names. One such name is the Floating City, made up as it is of 118 islands connected by canals, which can be crossed by one of 400 bridges. It measures just eight square kilometres (three square miles), but packs an astonishing number of stunning landmarks, cafes and activities into that small space.

Conveniently, three of those landmarks are all within a couple of minutes' walk from each other – namely Doge's Palace, St Mark's Basilica and St Mark's Square.

Doge's Palace is the spectacular result of a project lasting several centuries. Started in the 9th century, the seat of the Venetian government continued to be developed and redeveloped until well into the 17th century. This drawn-out building process means that the palace features an array of architectural styles, from Gothic to Renaissance – guaranteed to delight both the casual and committed architecture enthusiast. The palace wasn't only the Venetian Parliament; it was home to the Doge, and has also acted as a prison and the city's court, but is now a fascinating museum. It may be worth more than one visit too, because the palace changes colour throughout the day depending on the light – sometimes appearing white, but other times taking on a pinkish hue. The palace is well worth a walk around, but be sure to take a look at it from the Bridge of Sighs, which provides the best view of the palace. Be prepared, however, to battle dozens of fellow tourists attempting to do the same.

Also built in the 9th century, St Mark's Basilica houses the remains of St Mark the Evangelist. The city cathedral was built in the Byzantine style and has a staggering 8,000 square metres (86,000 square feet) of mosaic covering the walls and vaults. A visit to the Basilica has to be on anyone's Venice itinerary, as is a trip to the top of the 99-metre (323-foot) tall Campanile for incredible views of the city.

The square was built at the same time as the Basilica, and was enlarged in the 12th century – rapidly developing into the heart of the city. The square is the biggest open space in Venice, and can be a welcome relief to the at-times claustrophobic nature of the city. It may be a tad expensive, but there are few better places in the world to kick back with a coffee than at one of the cafes surrounding the square.

You'll appreciate having a rest, because there are so many glorious sights to see around the city, and there are no roads or cars in Venice. There are three ways to get around: on foot, via a water bus or on a gondola. The city is incredibly easy to walk around – you could get around the entire city in about half an hour if you got a good stride on. Make sure you have a detailed map if you're walking Venice without a guide, as the 2,650 alleys can get quite boggling! Other than the footbridges, the water bus (or vaporetto) is the best way to cross the canals or travel through the city if you're getting a bit tired or need to go somewhere quickly. These aren't particularly cheap, but they are regular and it's a lovely way to cruise a Venetian canal if you don't fancy shelling out for a gondola.

Having said that, is a trip to Venice truly complete without a ride on a gondola? These long, narrow boats are synonymous with the city, and provide a romantic, fun way to spend 40 minutes, guided and possibly serenaded by a local expert. There are just 400 licensed gondoliers in Venice, and only two or three licenses are given out per year after a rigorous exam process, so you know you are getting the very best that Venice has to offer. It's a beautiful, unique way to see a city, and an ideal way to have a break from the hustle and bustle of the streets.

The city is a work of art in itself, but if you are in the mood for even more, the Peggy Guggenheim Museum should be an essential part of your trip. Situated in Guggenheim's old house, there are dozens of pieces of Italian and American artwork, as well as new exhibits that have earned this museum global accolades. And if you think you recognise the name, Peggy Guggenheim is the niece of Solomon Guggenheim, who gave his name to the equally famous art gallery in New York.

Not many houses in the world have a watery back garden that is also a major highway

Essential information

As there are no cars in Venice, park just outside the city and get the bus into the town.

Best time to visit

June to July

Time zone

UTC+1

CURRENCY

€

EURO

Useful sites

WWW.VENEZIAUNICA.IT/EN/CONTENT/VISIT-VENICE-0

WWW.VISIT-VENICE-ITALY.COM/ADDRESS-TOURIST-BOARD-VENICE-ITALY.HTM

VENICE-TOURISM.COM/EN

VENICE CARNIVAL

Although Venice is at its most visually stunning in the summer, February to March is carnival season. The carnival takes place in the build up to Lent, meaning that the city is crammed with delicious food and drink to be consumed before the start of the fast. The carnival kicks off with the Flight of the Angel – as last year's Mary Carnival winner 'flies' across St Mark's Square. The Venetians really know how to celebrate, with traditional masked galas, parades and regattas along the canals. Venice celebrates its history and heritage in spectacular style, with masquerade balls providing a throwback to the time masks were banned in Venice. The entire city comes out to celebrate. Being such a small city with such a worldwide reputation, Venice can be pretty full, and the addition of thousands of revellers has the city bursting at the seams, but it's an incredible experience not to be missed.

Venice Carnival is 18 incredible days of balls, parades and fabulous masks

Also on the theme of art, many famous films have been set and shot in Venice. *Don't Look Now*, the 1973 movie starring Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland, purposefully avoided many of the main tourist locations in the city. A ten-minute walk from St Mark's Square will take you to Fondamenta San Severo, which is the site for the iconic scene when John Baxter first sees the figure in red, while five minutes further on brings you to the church that Baxter was restoring.

Make time for a stroll alongside the Grand Canal. While St Mark's Square may be the heart of the city, the Grand Canal is its main artery – meandering through the centre of Venice like a blueberry swirl through the finest Italian gelato. The best views are from the iconic Rialto Bridge, built in the 16th century and, for a long time, the only way to cross the Grand Canal. The bridge will often be busy and bustling with street traders, giving visitors an authentic city experience.

Venice is a beautiful step back through time, with its absence of cars and elegant Renaissance-era buildings. There are wondrous views around every corner, delicious foods to sample, and experiences like no other city – thanks mostly to the network of canals, gondolas and footbridges that gives tourists a truly unique experience. Now, it's also a fairly well-known fact that the English city of Birmingham has more miles of canals than Venice, but in which city would you rather spend a long weekend?

IS A TRIP TO VENICE TRULY COMPLETE WITHOUT A RIDE ON A GONDOLA?

The stunning St Mark's Basilica and Doge's Palace are iconic landmarks in the city

The Rialto Bridge has been a crucial site for locals and tourists for centuries – both functional and beautiful

Lake Como is home to sleepy Italian towns that are just waiting to be explored

Essential information

Renting a car is probably the easiest way of getting to the lakes, although public transport is available.

Best time to visit

All year round

Time zone

UTC+1

Currency

€

EURO

Useful sites

WWW.LAKECOMOTRAVEL.COM
WWW.INTRODUCINGMILAN.COM/LAKE-COMO
WWW.VISITCOMO.EU/EN

18

Lake Como

With stunning views and endless amounts to do, this really is the jewel of Italy

Nestled in the foothills of the Alps in northern Italy lies a wishbone-shaped lake, surrounded by beautiful hills covered in pine trees. The shoreline is dotted with picturesque towns and villages, while the calm water stretches for 32 kilometres (20 miles). This is Lake Como, a body of water that has been the holiday destination of choice for the rich and famous since the Romans ruled the Italian peninsula. Percy Bysshe Shelley once wrote about the region: "This lake exceeds anything I ever beheld in beauty."

While Lake Como is Italy's third-largest lake – behind Garda and Maggiore – its dramatic landscape lends itself to breathtaking views no matter where you are. If you're on the shore looking across the water's glassy surface, or you're walking high up in the hills, the scenery will feel like a small slice of heaven. But there's so much more to do here than just be awestruck by the views.

Lake Como is perhaps best known for its villas, like Villa Melzi with its botanical garden, and Villa Carlotta, which hosts a museum with works by Canova, Thorvaldsen and Hayez. But if what you're after is a little more of the traditional Italian lifestyle, you can take a stroll around the towns of Tremezzo, Como and Lecco; sample the delicious Italian cuisine with classic risottos and fresh fish dishes; and enjoy the relaxed and tranquil atmosphere that falls over the entire region.

Those looking for a slice of adventure won't find themselves bored here, though. The warm summer months lend themselves to water sports, and everyone is catered for on Lake Como. You'll find people windsurfing, canoeing, sailing, water skiing, jet skiing, kite surfing and more across Como's surface. Higher up in the hills you can try your hand at hang gliding and paragliding for the most impressive views of this gorgeous part of the Italian countryside, or just take a walk through the woods. If you prefer the cold, be sure to head to Lake Como in the winter for a spot of skiing at Piani di Bobbio and Pian delle Betulle – you definitely won't be disappointed.

Getting around isn't difficult either. Boats and buses run regularly, connecting the towns and villages that lie on the lake's shore. It's not even difficult to get to – at just 50 kilometres (31 miles) from Milan, you can reach Como by train in around 40 minutes, or book yourself onto the Lake Como Express from Bergamo Airport, which runs three times a day to the western shore as far as Menaggio.

With so much to do, explore and experience, there's no reason not to visit Lake Como. Whether you're booking your holiday to relax, take in some culture or learn how to jet ski, it's a travel destination that you'll never want to leave. The best part is that with so many places to visit along the miles of coastline, you can just keep coming back for more.

St Petersburg

Russia's cultural heart, St Petersburg's frozen-in-time opulence is garnished with an enthusiastic helping of contemporary eclecticism

Under the unruly northern sky, St Petersburg stares out across the Baltic Sea. Founded by Peter the Great in 1703 as a 'window into Europe', and designed by a slew of celebrated architects, today it's Russia's chameleonic second city. Effortlessly modern, it has lost none of its old-world grandeur.

The Palace Square makes a powerful first impression, the backdrop to some of Russia's most poignant events, from the Bloody Sunday massacre to the October Revolution. At its centre, the Alexander Column stands, commemorating the 1812 victory over Napoleon.

The green-and-white Winter Palace flanks the square's northern end – its Rococo exterior festooned with larger-than-life statues. Formerly a royal residence, it's now one of six buildings comprising the world-famous Hermitage Museum. The second-largest museum in the world, the sprawling complex spans 360 rooms, housing a selection of the collection's three million items.

Just across the Neva River lies the comparably modest Summer Palace, its grounds studded with impressive Italian sculptures imported by Peter the Great. Nearby, at the Field of Mars, a sombre flame burns for victims of the Russian revolutions of 1917.

Instantly recognisable, the pure-gold dome of St Isaac's Cathedral dominates the skyline and the huge square around it. Beyond its enormous doors remains elaborate stained glass and soaring columns of lapis lazuli and malachite. While its lavishly decorated dome looms large over the interior – which can hold 14,000 worshippers – its colonnaded walkway reveals panoramic views over the city for those willing to brave its 262 steps.

Just across the water, housing the tombs of Russia's imperial family, along with a Baroque cathedral and scalable fort, the Peter and Paul Fortress offers a glimpse into the city's storied past – constructed in 1703, it was one of St Petersburg's first buildings.

Continuing through history, literary buffs can walk the streets that inspired some of the greatest poems and prose ever written – from Alexander Pushkin's apartment to Catherine Canal, where scenes from Crime and Punishment unfold. There is also the FM Dostoevsky Literary-Memorial Museum, as well as the Stray Dog Café, a literary hangout frequented by the likes of Leo Tolstoy and Anna Akhmatova.

Come nightfall, the Mariinsky Theatre calls. St Petersburg's most impressive venue, it may be the epitome of ornate grandeur, but its ballet and opera credentials are unparalleled.

Essential information

The Hermitage Museum offers extended hours on Wednesday and Friday, and free entry on the first Thursday of every month.

Best time to visit

September to October (to avoid the crowds)

Time zone

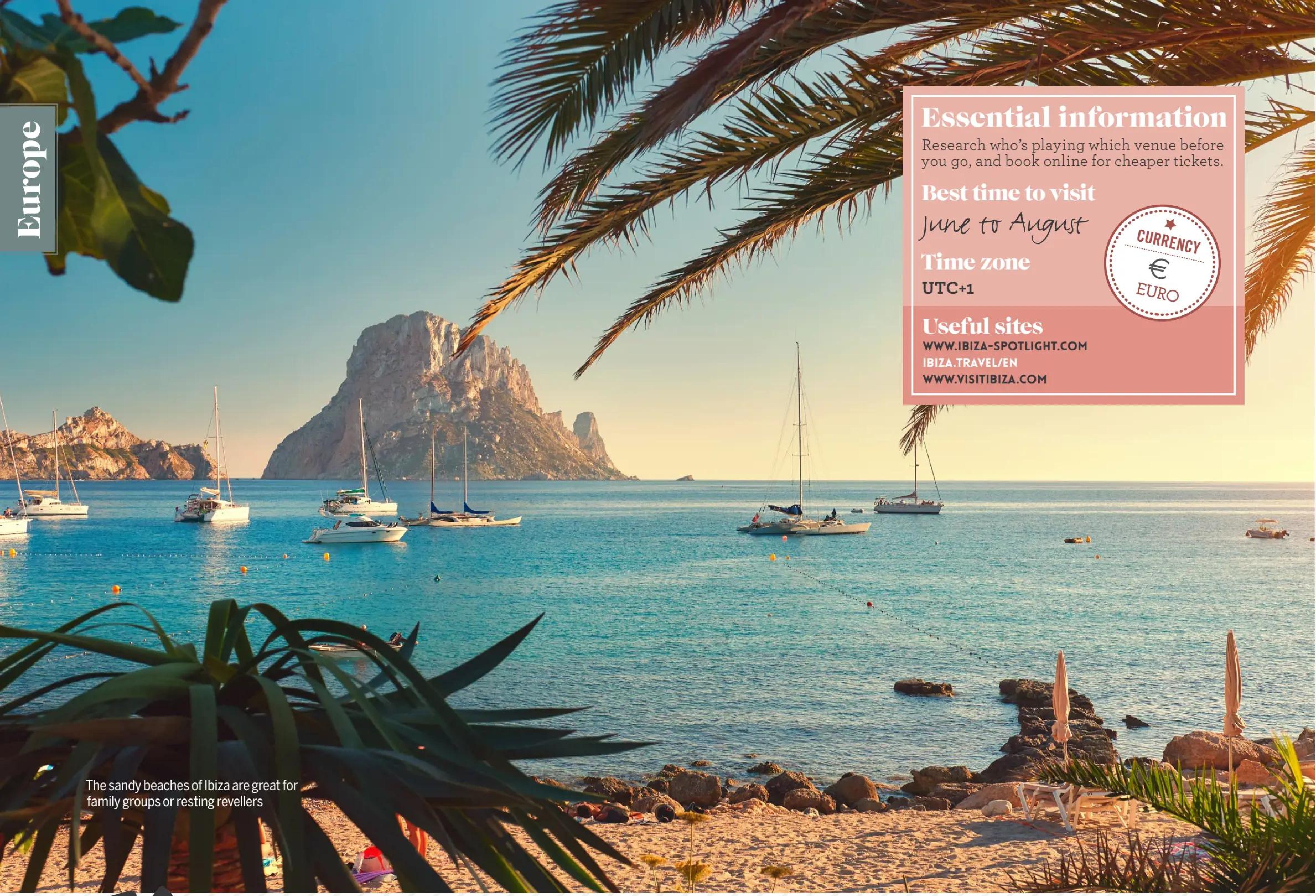
UTC+3

CURRENCY
₽
RUSSIAN RUBLE

Useful sites

WWW.HERMITAGEMUSEUM.ORG
WWW.VISIT-PETERSBURG.RU
WWW.FABERGEMUSEUM.RU

DO NOT TRAVEL
See p.4 for more information



The sandy beaches of Ibiza are great for family groups or resting revellers

Essential information

Research who's playing which venue before you go, and book online for cheaper tickets.

Best time to visit

June to August

Time zone

UTC+1

CURRENCY
€
EURO

Useful sites

WWW.IBIZA-SPOTLIGHT.COM
IBIZA.TRAVEL/EN
WWW.VISITIBIZA.COM

20

Ibiza

Spain's ultimate party island has more to offer than you might think

There are few places on Earth that are synonymous with one particular activity. Las Vegas is a gambler's paradise, for example, and Paris is the city of romance. Ibiza, a Balearic island in the Mediterranean Sea, has built its own reputation as the place to party harder than anywhere else.

Ibiza well deserves its reputation as the clubbing capital of the world. There are hundreds of nightspots across the small but attractive island, from small, walk-in bars to the world's biggest superclubs. The biggest of these is Privilege, which measures 6,500 square metres (70,000 square feet) and can hold 10,000 revellers. Most people will head to Ibiza in search of booze, bars and beaches, but there is a surprising amount to see and do during the daytime as well.

The two main destinations for a big night out are San Antonio and Playa d'en Bossa. Both are packed with bars and clubs playing everything from the latest chart hits to classic '80s cheese. San Antonio hosts the well-known superclubs Eden and Es Paradís, while Playa d'en Bossa boasts the spectacular open-air Ushuaïa. Some, like Pacha, Amnesia or Privilege, are further into the island, but regular 'discobuses' take you to and from the clubs throughout the evening and into the morning. These superclubs are quite costly to enter. You could pay up to £50 ($65) for a ticket, and the drinks can also set you back a lot – so be prepared! It's rare to pay to enter the smaller bars and clubs, and most places will offer big deals on drinks to get you in. However, a trip to Ibiza isn't complete without a visit to at least one iconic superclub, and the experience is simply staggering.

There are also plenty of mid-range watering holes to keep you going throughout the day, such as Ibiza Rocks, Ocean Beach Club or Pikes Hotel, where Wham's *Club Tropicana* was filmed – although unfortunately the drinks aren't free!

Ibiza is the perfect destination for a sunny break. Even in winter, the daytime temperature rarely drops below 15 degrees Celsius (59 degrees Fahrenheit), and in the height of summer that can more than double – ideal for soaking up the sunshine on Ibiza's 210 kilometres (130 miles) of golden, sandy beaches, which have gained UNESCO World Heritage status.

The longest and most well-known of Ibiza's beaches is Playa d'en Bossa. While one end of the two-kilometre (1.2-mile) stretch of sand is quiet and tranquil for family holidaymakers, the other is party central, with bars, music and water-based, high-octane activities. The atmosphere is buzzing throughout the day, so you can get yourself mentally and physically warmed up for the big night ahead.

Beyond the bars and beaches is an island steeped in history. Ibiza Old Town is charming, filled with interesting shops, varied restaurants and a quaint harbour. Dalt Vila, or 'upper town', is a fortified, walled town that gives you stunning views of the harbour and town – make sure you've got your walking shoes on as the cobbled streets get quite steep, but it's more than worth making the trek.

Ibiza might not be the same place it was in its heyday of the '70s and '80s, and now has plenty of nightlife competition around the world, but there truly is no experience quite like a wild week away hitting up Ibiza's unique, world-renowned clubs or relaxing on its gorgeous beaches. Ibiza most certainly rocks.

Dubrovnik

Croatia's stunning seaport is worthy of its world-renowned reputation

With its enticing combination of history, culture and coastal scenery, it's no wonder that Dubrovnik has become one of the most popular choices for European holidays in recent years.

Begin your tour of Dubrovnik with a walk along its iconic city walls. The two-kilometre (1.2-mile) stretch provides some of the best views of the Old Town, as well as stunning panoramas of the azure-tinted Adriatic Sea. The first of Dubrovnik's city walls were constructed in the 9th century, with defences being fortified in the 14th century, and forts added to protect against Turkish attacks in the 15th century. These fortresses can be observed as you walk the walls, and your admission ticket will give you access to Fort Lovrijenac, one of the city's most fascinating fortresses and a recognisable filming location from *Game of Thrones*.

Access to the city walls is granted via two historic gates, Pile and Ploče. Pile is more popular among tourists, so you can get a jump on the crowds by starting your stroll at Ploče. The walk provides little shelter and can be notoriously hot on sunny days, so prepare for scorching weather and take lots of water to avoid overpaying at opportunistic vendors.

Other historic sights to witness in Dubrovnik include Rector's Palace, a Gothic-Renaissance palace that doubles as a cultural history museum; the Franciscan Monastery, which houses a 14th-century pharmacy; and the Large Onofrio's Fountain, which spews drinkable water from the mouths of 16 ornately carved masks.

You can take in the whole city at once from Srđ, a 412-metre (1,352-foot) hill that overlooks Dubrovnik and provides unbeatable views of the Old Town, the island of Lokrum and the Elafiti Islands. The easiest and most enjoyable route to the top is via cable car – head up just before sunset to see Dubrovnik at its most enchanting and magical.

Once you're done sightseeing, why not mix things up with a spot of sea kayaking? The activity is a popular pastime in Dubrovnik, and a fun way to get active while enjoying a different perspective of the local scenery. It's easy enough to kayak your way across to the lush island of Lokrum as part of a guided tour. The car-free isle is a popular spot for swimming and relaxing on the beach, and provides a tranquil retreat.

All that walking and paddling is hungry work. Luckily enough, Dubrovnik is filled with restaurants that serve some of the best food in Croatia. The specialities here are based on locally caught seafood, and include grilled fish and squid risotto – head to Lokanda Peskarija or Restaurant Proto for some of the best.

For a drink, D'vino offers cosy vibes and an excellent selection of Croatian wine, making it a popular choice, or you can enjoy intoxicating ocean views while sipping beverages at one of two popular cliff-top bars: Buža I and Buža II.

Dubrovnik's well-preserved Old Town is a UNESCO World Heritage Site

Essential information

Buy a Dubrovnik Card for free access to many popular attractions, including the city walls.

Best time to visit

April to June

Time zone

UTC+1

CURRENCY

kn

CROATIAN KUNA

Useful sites

WWW.VISIT-CROATIA.CO.UK/CROATIA-DESTINATIONS/DUBROVNIK
WWW.DUBROVNIKCARD.COM
WWW.CHASINGTHEDONKEY.COM

The Elizabeth Tower is often called Big Ben, but this is in fact the name of the bell

Essential information

You can buy or top up an Oyster travel card or use a contactless bank card for London transport.

Best time to visit

March to May (for mild weather and flowers in bloom) or June to July (for royal palace openings)

Time zone

UTC

CURRENCY
£
GREAT BRITISH POUND

Useful sites

HTTPS://TFL.GOV.UK
WWW.LONDONPASS.COM
WWW.HRP.ORG.UK

22

London

From red phone boxes to black cabs, there's an iconic sight on every corner in England's capital city

Samuel Johnson once said: "When a man is tired of London, he's tired of life." London is one of the most vibrant cities in the world. It's packed with things to see and do, from beautiful architecture and history to iconic landmarks and, of course, the Royal Family! It's a shopaholic's paradise, a culture vulture's dream and a major foodie hotspot. But beyond this, every neighbourhood has something unique to offer.

Red telephone booths, double-decker buses and the Underground are synonymous with London, but the city is full of iconic sights. One of the most famous landmarks is Big Ben. You can't take a trip to London without taking a photograph in front of the Elizabeth Tower and Houses of Parliament. Mistakenly, most people think Big Ben is the 96-metre (315-foot) clock tower, but it is in fact the massive 13-ton (13,760-kilogram) bell. It's a spectacular sight to see, particularly when lit up at night. Tower Bridge is another landmark that often appears on postcards. One of the city's most famous bridges, its high-level walkways not only offer incredible views of the city, but a different perspective of the River Thames through its glass floor.

There are countless places for epic views, but arguably some of the best vistas can be seen from the London Eye, Europe's largest observation wheel. There is also The View from The Shard; London's tallest building offers the highest viewpoint at 244 metres (800 feet).

If history is what you're after, the Tower of London is the place to visit. This royal palace, fortress and infamous prison encompasses more than 1,000 years of history. Visitors can meet the iconic 'Beefeaters', hear tales of torture and execution, and visit the Crown Jewels at this UNESCO World Heritage Site.

London has three other World Heritage Sites: the Palace of Westminster and Westminster Abbey, Maritime Greenwich, and the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew. The Palace of Westminster is not only a stunning piece of Victorian Gothic architecture, but it's also home to the Houses of Parliament. Next door, Westminster Abbey is Britain's coronation church and the venue for Prince William and Catherine's wedding.

London has some unique neighbourhoods from affluent Mayfair to bohemian Camden, but the leafy area of Greenwich has some of the best highlights, including the Royal Observatory, National Maritime Museum, Cutty Sark and Greenwich Market. Here you can visit the home of Greenwich Mean Time, see the uniform that Nelson was wearing when he was killed at the Battle of Trafalgar, discover the world's largest surviving tea clipper, or sample delicious food.

While 30 minutes from the city centre, Kew Gardens highlights its greener side. The world's most diverse collection of living plants is housed here. Hyde Park, Hampstead Heath, Richmond Park, The Regent's Park and St James's Park are just a few of the other green spaces that draw attention to London's natural beauty.

While spring is one of the best times to visit to see London in bloom, if you want a regal day out, you'll have to come in the summer when Buckingham Palace, the Queen's official London residence, opens to the public. From the Changing of the Guard – a formal ceremony of the Queen's guards in their red uniforms and bearskin hats – to the 19 lavish stately rooms inside, the palace never fails to impress. Other awe-inspiring palaces include Kensington, the birthplace of Queen Victoria; and Hampton Court, Henry VIII's favourite royal residence. If you still haven't had your royal quota, visit St Paul's Cathedral to see where Prince Charles and Diana were married. Climb the 528 steps to the Golden Gallery for spectacular views, or listen to the acoustics in the Whispering Gallery.

Designed by Britain's most famous architect, Sir Christopher Wren, St Paul's is not the only masterpiece. Christ Church at Spitalfields, the Old Painted Hall at the Old Royal Naval College and the St Pancras Renaissance Hotel are all visually astonishing and worth a trip.

London has a plethora of beautiful sights to see, but it's also bursting with things to do. The city is packed with museums and galleries, many of which are free to visit. From the Rosetta Stone at the British Museum to Vincent van Gogh's *Sunflowers* at The National Galley, it's a treasure trove. Other cultural gems include Tate Modern and Tate Britain, the National Portrait Gallery, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Natural History Museum.

Music fans are just as spoilt for choice. Visit the shooting locations for some of the most famous album covers, including the Beatles' *Abbey Road*, or go to top-notch record stores and music venues. Among the best music venues are the Royal Albert Hall, Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club, The Roundhouse in Camden and the 02, which hosts some of the biggest names in music.

But it's not just music and art. London has every form of entertainment from theatre in the West End or at Shakespeare's Globe, to nightclubs, pubs and bars. Have a pint at The George Inn near London Bridge, where Shakespeare once drank, or sip a James Bond martini at DUKES Bar.

Dozens of new bars and restaurants open every month, making the city a holy grail for foodies. From street food to fine dining, there's something for everyone. Visit Brick Lane for a curry, wander Borough Market or take your pick from one of almost 70 Michelin-starred restaurants. If you want the quintessential British experience, have a full English breakfast at a local café, enjoy afternoon tea at The Ritz, or eat fish and chips at Poppies.

ESTD 1887
PORTOBELLO ROAD W.11

Hunt for an antique at Portobello Market, just one of London's incredible markets

London is also a fashion capital. From high-end boutiques in Mayfair to flagship stores on Oxford Street, you can shop until you drop. If you're after more than just clothes, Harrods and Fortnum & Mason are almost attractions in their own right, and London's markets, especially Portobello Road, are the perfect place to hunt for antiques and one-of-a-kind items.

London has something for everyone. Kids can get a thrill riding the ArcelorMittal Orbit, the world's longest tunnel slide, and sports fans can visit Lord's, Wembley or Wimbledon.

It's such a multicultural city that you can dine on Asian food in Chinatown, watch French cinema at the Barbican, and learn Flamenco at the Southbank Centre all in one day. There are so many events from the Notting Hill Carnival to Chinese New Year. And there's always something different to do. Ride a narrowboat on Regent's Canal, watch street performers in Covent Garden or visit Sherlock Holmes' Baker Street home.

One of the best things about London is that it's ever-changing. You could visit a dozen times and never run out of new things to discover. You may get tired running around trying to do it all, but like Samuel Johnson, you'll never get tired of London.

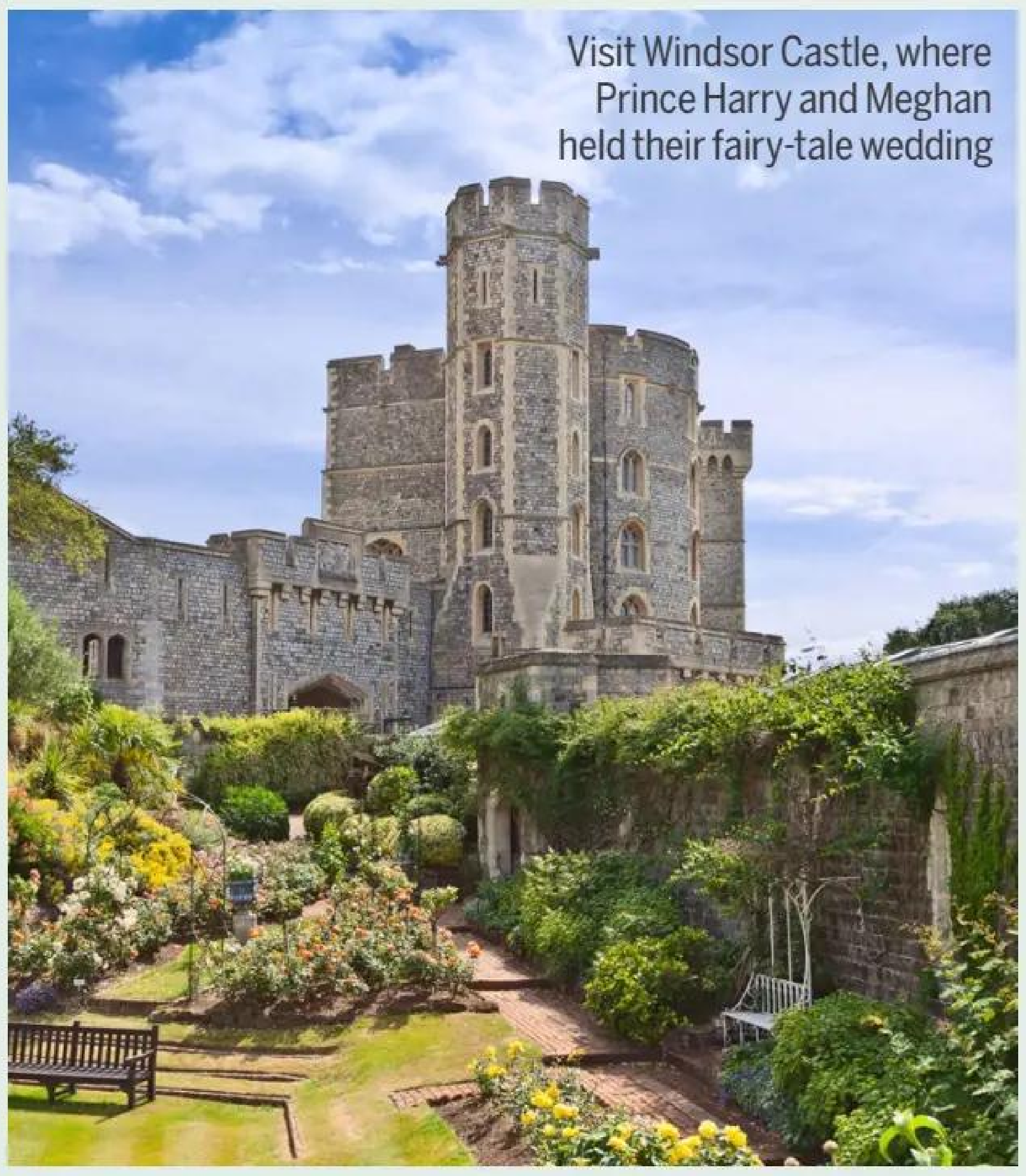
FAIRY-TALE VISIT

You can see palaces in London, but if you're making the journey to the UK, you might as well make a trip to one of the best known of them all. Take a day trip to see the world's oldest castle and the venue for two recent royal weddings. Walk in the footsteps of Prince Harry and Meghan Markle or Princess Eugenie and Jack Brooksbank who were both married here.

Windsor Castle is the largest occupied castle, covering 13 acres (five hectares). It is currently one of the Queen's residences, and she spends most of her private weekends here. The castle has more than 900 years of history and has been home to 39 monarchs.

Take an audio tour narrated by Prince Charles to visit the opulent state rooms and marvel at the Gothic architecture of St George's Chapel. When else will you get to wander a castle?

It's a one-hour train journey from London, but very much worth it for a magical day out.

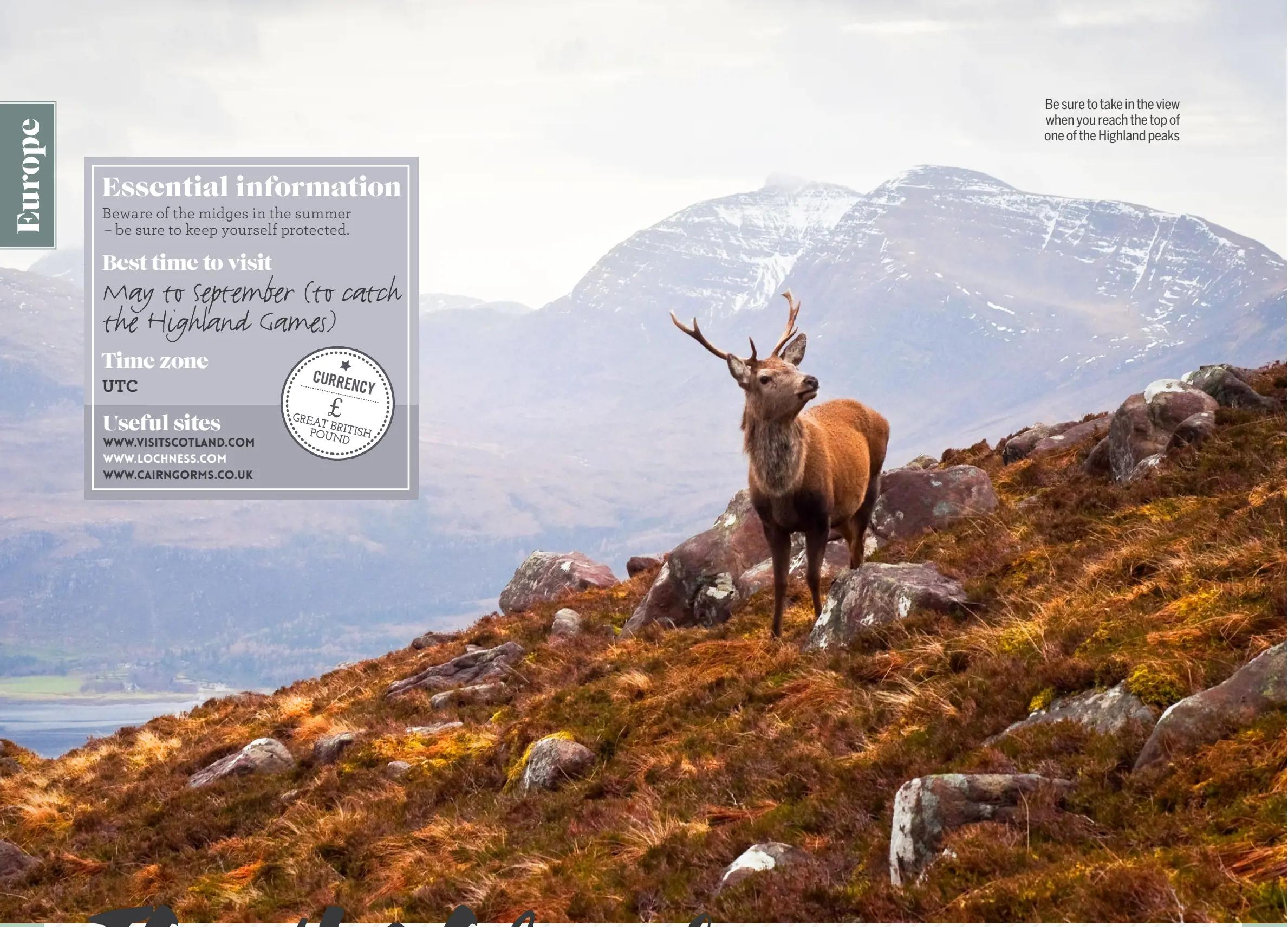


Visit Windsor Castle, where Prince Harry and Meghan held their fairy-tale wedding

YOU COULD VISIT A DOZEN TIMES AND NEVER RUN OUT OF THINGS TO DISCOVER

St Paul's Cathedral was designed by famous British architect Sir Christopher Wren

If you want to tour Buckingham Palace, you'll need to visit between the end of July and September



Be sure to take in the view when you reach the top of one of the Highland peaks

Essential information

Beware of the midges in the summer – be sure to keep yourself protected.

Best time to visit

May to September (to catch the Highland Games)

Time zone

UTC

CURRENCY
£
GREAT BRITISH POUND

Useful sites

WWW.VISITSCOTLAND.COM
WWW.LOCHNESS.COM
WWW.CAIRNGORMS.CO.UK

The Highlands

Scotland's breathtaking landscapes are just waiting to be uncovered

If for your next trip you're looking for an ethereal, rugged landscape, look no further than the Scottish Highlands. With something for everyone, from wildlife spotting to drinking Scotland's famous whiskies, it's the perfect destination no matter what your tastes.

The Highlands are perhaps best known for the lochs, which are littered around the area, each providing a unique experience. Some are on the main tourist trails – those like Loch Ness with its famed 'monster' and Loch Lomond – and can be easily reached on day tours from Edinburgh and Glasgow. Others are hidden away, waiting to be stumbled upon, like Loch Morlich and Loch an Eilein near Aviemore. Each one is worth a visit to experience the peaceful waters and wooded slopes that envelope the lakes.

But those slopes are worth exploring in themselves. Take a trek through the Cairngorms National Park to reach the top of Ben Macdui or Braeriach. A little closer to Aberdeen you can find Bennachie, although this is out of the Highlands itself, or near Fort William you'll come across Ben Nevis, Britain's highest peak. No matter whether you're in the north, south, east or west of the Highlands, there's no feeling quite like scaling one of the peaks – some of which are good for novices – and the views from the top are always breathtaking.

Of course, not everyone goes on holiday to spend all their time in the great outdoors, and the Highlands is more than ready to provide. Take a trip to the historic city of Inverness before making your way down the coast of Loch Ness to Urquhart Castle at Strone, and Fort Augustus. Check out the typical Highland towns of Nairn and Aviemore, or head as far north as you can until you reach John O'Groats.

For those who want to take things a little slower, the Highlands region is known for something else: whisky. Plenty of distilleries open their doors to whisky drinkers, offering tours and tastings to those over the age of 18. From Ardmore and Glenmorangie, to Knockdhu and Tomatin, it's the perfect excuse to try some of Scotland's finest exports and buy those all-important gifts for friends and family back home. However, it is important to point out that Scotland has incredibly strict drink-driving laws compared to the rest of the United Kingdom – while in England, Wales and Northern Ireland you're considered over the limit with 35 micrograms per 100 millilitres of breath, in Scotland it's just 22.

But there's one thing you can't miss when visiting the Highlands. If you get the opportunity and you're visiting in the summer, head to the Highland Games for a traditional Scottish experience. Watch the caber toss, hammer throw and a tug o'war, before a parade of pipers makes its way around the arena. You can also enjoy track and field events, Highland dancing competitions, and good food and drink. A fun day out for all.

If you haven't already booked your trip to the Highlands, what are you waiting for? Whether you want to trek in the hills, explore the towns and villages in the area, or enjoy the Highland Games, it's the perfect getaway for all.

Stockholm

World-leading style, culture and flavour are yours for the taking in Sweden's capital city

Scandinavia has become synonymous with cool, minimalistic design and a forward-thinking approach to modern life. Stockholm epitomises this identity like nowhere else. The Swedish capital is as effortlessly cool as the well-dressed, friendly folk who live there, offering city breaks that combine unique museums, laid-back dining and good old-fashioned urban exploring.

Stockholm is spread across 14 islands. You might think that this would make it tricky to get around, but the city has an excellent public transport system, and most destinations are within walking distance of one another. Bring some sturdy boots if you plan on visiting in winter; Stockholm's icy streets can take their toll on shoe leather after a long day of strolling between landmarks and cafés.

Begin your Swedish sojourn in Stockholm's aesthetically appealing Old Town. The island of Gamla Stan is at the heart of the city, and is home to the Royal Palace (Kungliga Slottet). With more than 600 rooms, museums and galleries, this enormous building is the official residence of the King of Sweden. Take a tour of the royal digs, and be sure to check out the Changing of the Guard ceremony.

Other worthwhile sights on Gamla Stan include Stockholm Cathedral and the Nobel Museum. Perhaps the best way to soak in the area is to simply amble around its cobblestone streets, taking time to marvel at the historic sights you'll see along the way.

To experience how modern residents live, head for the quirky and hip island of Södermalm. This is one of the best places in the city to browse boutique stores and stock up on the coolest Scandinavian fashion, taking inspiration from chic locals hanging out in the area's enviable selection of cafés and bars.

Make the most of these fine establishments by partaking in the quintessential Swedish ritual of 'fika' – a coffee and cake break dedicated to socialising with friends while enjoying the simple pleasures of food and drink. Alongside its sweet treats, Stockholm is awash with savoury flavour thanks to ingredients from its nearby fields, forests and waters. Specialities range from classic Swedish meatballs and fried herring to more modern cuisine, including some of the best vegan food in the world and fantastic options for health-conscious diners.

Swedes also love their beer – craft ale aficionados will be right at home here, where cheaper pints are served after work, and micro-brewed beverages can be sipped in practically every bar you visit.

Museums in Stockholm demand to be seen. From the Vasa Museum (Vasamuseet), home of an ill-fated Swedish warship that's been masterfully reassembled, to Skansen, the world's first open-air museum that re-creates Sweden in miniature, these hubs of specialist knowledge are arguably the best way to gain an insight into Swedish culture during a short stay in the city. Pop fans won't want to miss ABBA The Museum, and on the other end of the cultural spectrum, Moderna Museet's collection of modern art is free to peruse.

Stockholm's Old Town on Gamla Stan is where the city was originally founded

Essential information

Stockholm is on its way to becoming a cash-free city, so take your bank card.

Best time to visit

June to August

Time zone

UTC+1

CURRENCY
kr
SWEDISH KRONA

Useful sites

WWW.VISITSTOCKHOLM.COM
WWW.SLOWTRAVELSTOCKHOLM.COM
WWW.STOCKHOLMTOURIST.BLOGSPOT.COM

Mountains set the scene in this culturally rich city, with plenty for adults and children to explore

Essential information

Book a northern lights tour early in your trip, to allow for re-booking if needed.

Best time to visit

May to September (for more hours of daylight)

Time zone

UTC

CURRENCY

kr

ICELANDIC KRONA

Useful sites

GRAPEVINE.IS
WWW.ICELANDTRAVEL.IS
WWW.LOCAL-ICELAND-TOURS.COM

25

Reykjavík

Journey to Iceland's capital to experience breathtaking scenery and spectacular natural wonders

Reykjavík is a city like no other. Backdropped by mountains and located along Iceland's south-western shoreline, embracing the constantly changing climate of the capital is all part and parcel of visiting one of the world's most exciting destinations.

The city is a cultural hub for those looking to get more familiar with Icelandic history, as well as its modern way of life. Featuring a wide array of museums to suit everybody's tastes, from The Settlement Exhibition, the Saga Museum and The National Gallery of Iceland, to the Whales of Iceland exhibition and the Reykjavík Museum of Photography, you're never without somewhere to visit on rainy days.

Divulge your taste buds in some of the best fish and chips at the Reykjavík Fish Restaurant along the harbour, or chomp on a fresh hot dog at the little Bæjarins Beztu Pylsur stall. If you're feeling adventurous, try out some of Iceland's more traditional delicacies, including fermented shark (hákarl), lamb soup (kjötsúpa) and dried fish (harðfiskur).

You can't visit Reykjavik without dipping your toes into a geothermal pool for instant relaxation and to soothe those sore muscles. The popular Blue Lagoon lies just a 50-minute drive away from the city centre, and will set you back around £70 ($95) entry per person. Or, for a budget-friendly alternative, locate one of the city's public swimming complexes, for example Vesturbæjarlaug, to enjoy a variety of hot pools at various temperatures for a fee of just £6 ($8) entry for adults.

Visit a Reykjavík Roasters café to slake your thirst for caffeine and enjoy expertly made coffee that will leave a lasting impression. Be wary, though, as shopping in Iceland comes with a hefty price tag. Sticking to a budget and looking for those deals where possible will make pennies stretch further. Use the AppyHour app to give you a list of all the pubs and restaurants that have deals running on drinks at any one time.

Treat Iceland's capital as a base to explore from, as most of the country's sights can be accessed through either organised tours or by hiring a rental car. A couple of days is all that's required to explore the city's highlights before heading out into the wild to witness majestic glaciers, gigantic waterfalls and exploding geysers.

Take a day out to explore the Golden Circle; a round-up of some of Iceland's most spectacular natural wonders. Sights include the stunning Thingvellir National Park that, when visited during the snowy season, is truly a winter wonderland. Also featured on the tour is Gullfoss, a huge waterfall fed from a glacier that's visible in the background on a clear day.

A northern lights tour is a must for those visiting Iceland. A tour will typically last three to five hours. Don't forget to take your camera to capture the colourful natural wonder in all its glory, although buying photos from your tour organiser is sometimes an option.

The fact that the number of tourists who visit Iceland each year outweighs the country's actual population by six times over is evident of just how popular this island has become as a destination to not miss out on.

26

Istanbul

Turkey's cultural capital lays bare its metamorphosis from Roman conquest to modern metropolis

Dissected by the glittering Bosphorus strait, separating Europe from Asia, Istanbul is – unlike any other city in the world – a tale of two continents. But its charm is less about East meets West, than new colliding with old.

Founded by the Greeks in the 7th century, Istanbul, formerly known as Byzantium, was conquered by the Persians, Athenians, Spartans and Macedonians. It later became the capital of the Roman Empire, when Emperor Constantine rechristened it Constantinople, and remained the capital of the Byzantine Empire for more than 1,000 years, before falling to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

Luring conquerors and commoners alike, Istanbul's geographic position, straddling two continents, wasn't its only draw – the city also marked the end of the Silk Road. Many a passing merchant loved it so much they decided to stay, weaving a rich cultural tapestry that still exists today, marked into its architectural landscape.

Thanks to its storied past, Istanbul is a living, open-air museum, studded with relics of the great powers who ruled over it – from Roman waterways to extravagant Ottoman estates. This patchwork of historical gems is interrupted with welcome bursts of modern life – contemporary art museums, nightclubs and classic mansions with sleek, glass-fronted extensions. The old quarter's fabled skyline of minarets and domes still sits atop a tangle of narrow, cobbled streets that echo with the muezzin's five daily calls to prayer.

The vestiges of Istanbul's ancient past are mainly dotted around the Sultanahmet district. The opulent pavilions of Topkapı Palace, the administrative seat of the Ottoman Empire for 400 years, stretches behind the magnificent Hagia Sophia (Ayasofya in Turkish). Built by Byzantine emperor Justinian, the basilica was consecrated as a church in 537, before Mehmet II converted it into a mosque in 1453. Atatürk, the father of modern Turkey, later pronounced it a museum.

Gazing across Sultanahmet Square is the iconic Blue Mosque, festooned with 20,000 handcrafted Iznik tiles – famously created from quartz rather than traditional clay. A short stroll northwest, Süleymaniye Mosque crowns one of Istanbul's seven hills, towering over the medieval Grand Bazaar and its labyrinthine maze of coffee shops and stalls – tended by polo-shirt-clad men, balancing spices and loose-leaf tea on brass scales used by their fathers and grandfathers before them.

Just a cheap ferry ride across the Golden Horn, the medieval Galata Tower watches over 'new' Istanbul, and the vibrant entertainment districts of Karaköy, Beyoğlu and its namesake Galata – replete with coffee shops, galleries, rooftop bars and boutiques. With cuisine as diverse as its heritage, Istanbul is a food-lover's paradise. Smoky, succulent kebabs, freshly caught fish and syrupy desserts are best washed down with rakı, the national drink of aniseed brandy, or local wine.

For those who tire of city life, the car-free Princes' Islands, once a safe haven for exiled royal members, are just a 20-kilometre (12-mile) boat trip away. Here, sandy coves and pine forests converge, as horse-drawn carriages with leather seats trundle past seafood restaurants strung along the harbour, hawking the day's catch. A great opportunity to relax.

Essential information

To evade the crowds, visit Topkapı Palace on a Monday morning, and avoid the Hagia Sophia on a Friday.

Best time to visit

April to May or September to November

Time zone

UTC+3

CURRENCY
₺
TURKISH LIRA

Useful sites

WWW.GOTURKEYTOURISM.COM
WWW.SEHIRHATLARI.ISTANBUL
WWW.LOCALLYISTANBUL.COM

Overlooking Sultanahmet Square, the Blue Mosque is adorned with 20,000 handmade Iznik tiles, made from quartz, typically in dark blue, turquoise, emerald and coral

Rome

Visit the stunning capital of Italy and experience a part of history

Italy's capital will take you on a journey into the past while enabling you to enjoy the cosmopolitan buzz of a fashionable city. Explore ancient Roman ruins, soak up the art and culture, and enjoy the incredible cuisine.

Begin your day with a trip to the Colosseum, then take a walk through the Roman Forum and on to the Pantheon. The Colosseum is a spectacle not to be missed – it's the largest amphitheatre ever built, and still an icon of Imperial Rome. Even if you don't want to venture inside, you'll really regret not taking the time to see it in person. The area around it can feel a little daunting; the roads are wide and busy, but there are some lovely restaurants close by where you can enjoy a traditional lasagne with a view of the spectacular structure. The Colosseum is striking at any time of day, but imagine sitting in view of it with a glass of Italian wine as the sun sets and streams through its many arches. We really can't think of many things better than starting and ending your day at this stunning building.

The Roman Forum is another iconic landmark of the Roman Empire. It's filled with temples, squares and old government buildings that are well worth taking a stroll around. You can explore it alone or join a tour to learn about the interesting history of the site. Nearby the Pantheon is a 2,000-year-old temple, the best preserved of all of Rome's ancient monuments. It is one of the most influential buildings in the Western world. Venturing through its large, bronze doors and into the largest unreinforced concrete dome ever built is probably as awe-inspiring and breathtaking as it was when it was first constructed. Despite its age, it's still as stunning as ever.

Vatican City, the independent city-state, is the headquarters of the Roman Catholic Church. A trip to the Vatican should be left for a day when you have nothing else planned, as there is a lot to see. It's home to St Peter's Basilica and the Vatican Museums, which contain artistic masterpieces such as Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel frescoes.

The Vatican is by far the city's most popular tourist destination, so be prepared for a lot of people and many, many queues. If this fills you with dread, just be sure to avoid Wednesdays, as this is usually when the Papal Audience takes place. This is when the Pope is in Rome, meaning there will be even more people. In the warmer months, this is often held in St Peter's Square, so if you do want to get a glimpse of the Pope then head on down – just prepare yourself for a lot of people around! Visiting the Vatican Museums with a tour is by far the best way to do it, and between April and October you can book to visit the museum at night, which means there are fewer people to cope with. If you plan on visiting St Peter's Basilica, then you must be dressed appropriately – no bare knees, midriffs or shoulders on show.

Make a wish at this fountain and all of your dreams might come true

Essential information

Watch out for pickpockets, especially around busy piazzas and packed tourist destinations.

Best time to visit

April to October (if you want to see the Pope!)

Time zone

UTC+1

CURRENCY

€

EURO

Useful sites

WWW.VATICANTICKETS.ORG
WWW.COLOSSEUM-ROME-TICKETS.COM
WWW.ROME.INFO

You can't move in Rome without a picture-perfect vista in your sights

Take a wander around the old government buildings of ancient Rome

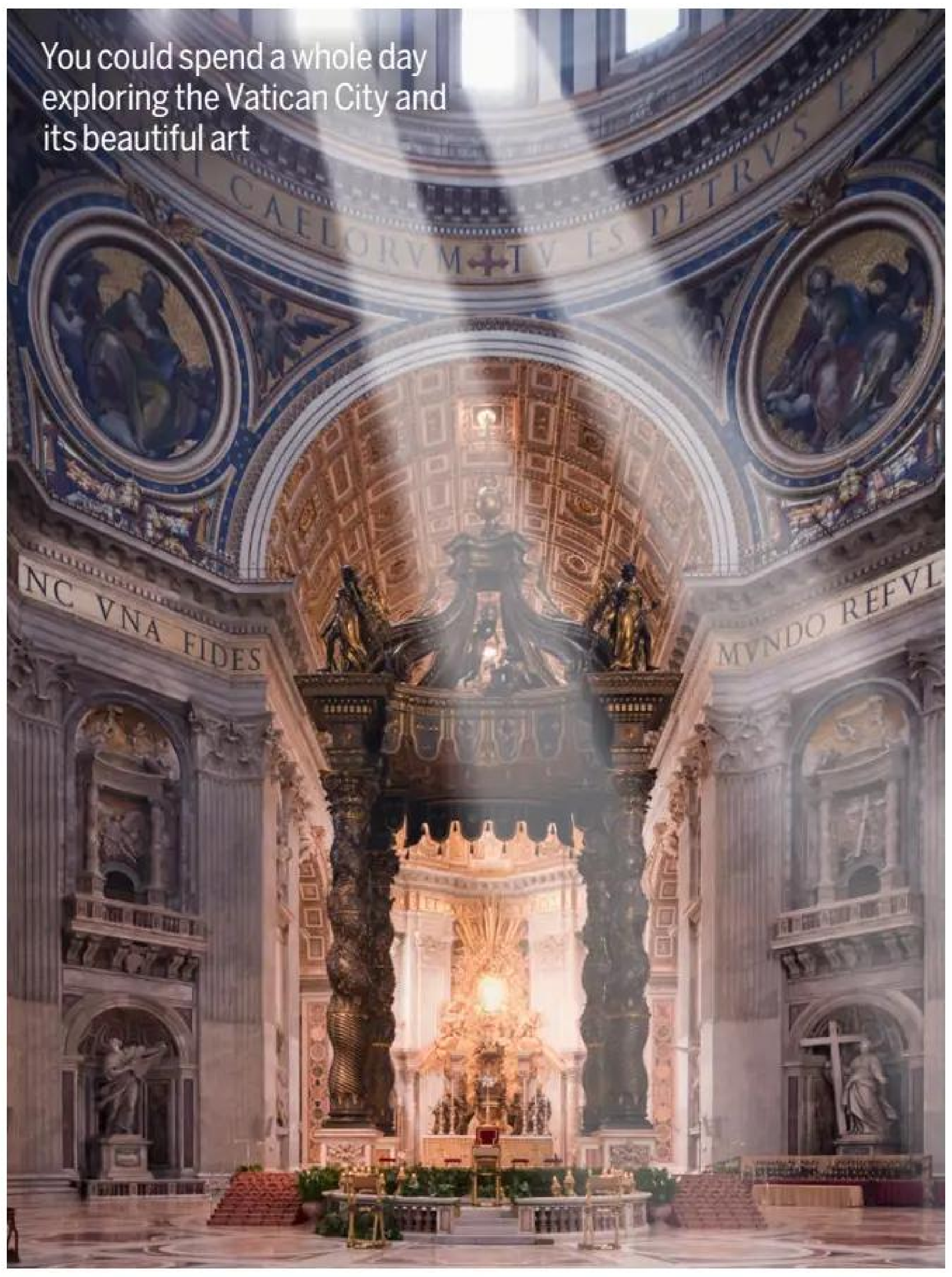
The Colosseum: one of the most iconic sights of Rome

THERE ARE MANY PRETTY FOUNTAINS TO BE FOUND IN THE CITY'S PIAZZAS

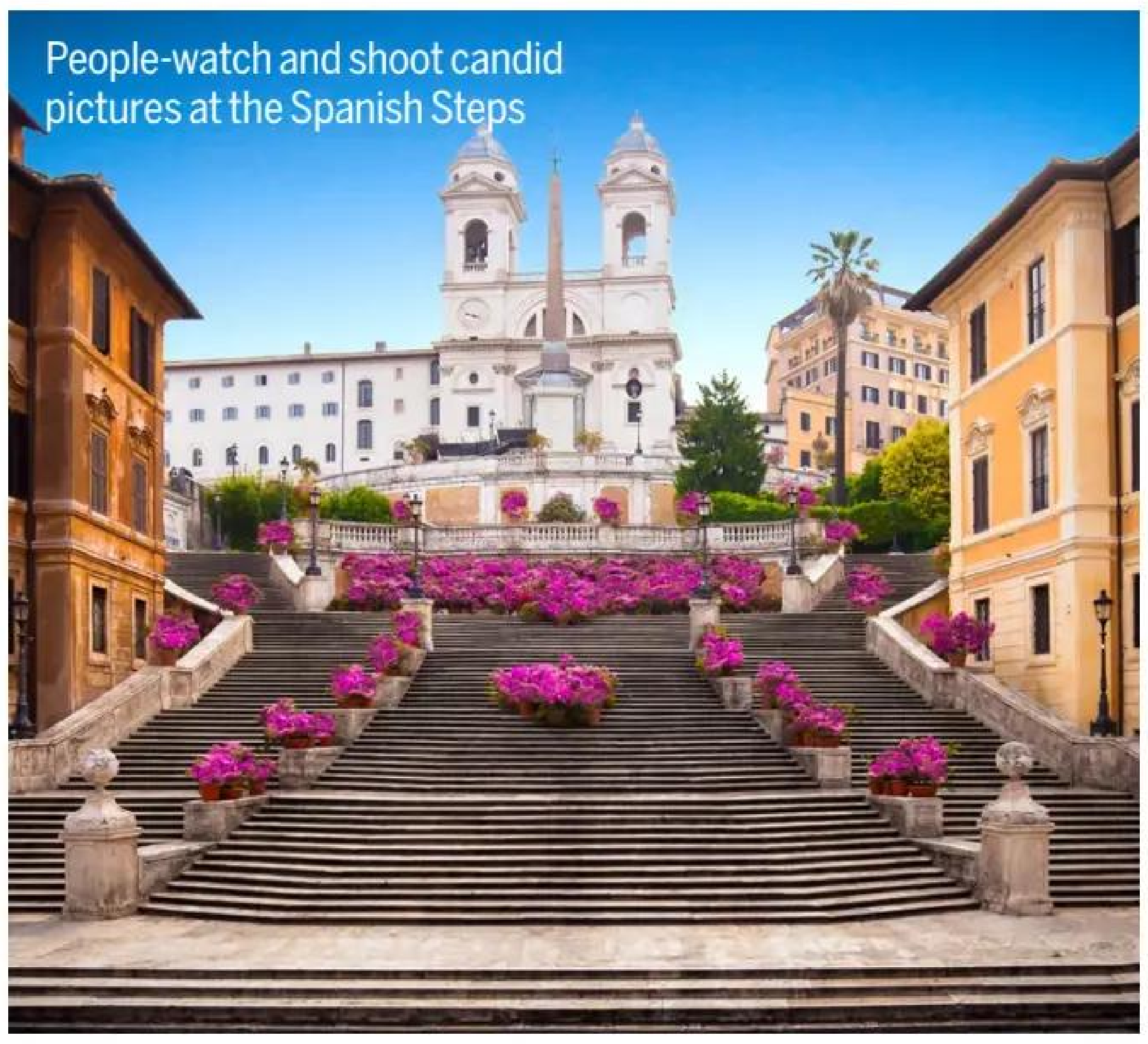
The most popular square in Rome, Piazza Navona, shouldn't be left off your itinerary. The piazza is lined with restaurants, cafes and swanky shops to explore – but it will definitely burn a hole in your wallet! The ornate fountain, Fontana dei Quattro Fiumi, sits at its centre too. Another piazza not to forget about is Piazza di Spagna, which is where the city's famous Spanish Steps are. It's a central meeting place for both locals and tourists, and a great place for people-watching and candid photography.

In the evening, take a romantic walk to the famous Trevi Fountain, and make a wish by throwing a coin in using your right hand over your left shoulder – a tradition at the fountain. Standing 26 metres (85 feet) tall and 49 metres (161 feet) wide, it is the largest Baroque fountain in the city. There are many pretty fountains to be found in the city's piazzas where you can enjoy a delicious Italian coffee, sample crisp white wine from the nearby Castelli Romani hills, and make sure you don't miss out on trying the gelato. On the way to the Trevi Fountain you'll stumble across Giolitti, which is Rome's oldest and best gelateria – well worth the pit stop.

After a long day exploring the once 'caput mundi' (capital of the world), enjoy watching the world go by in one of the pizzerias or trattorias located within the many piazzas. Don't forget to sample traditional dishes that can only be truly enjoyed in Rome. Seek out a proper Roman carbonara, made with just a handful of ingredients, or look for the classic amatriciana, made with a rich tomato sauce and savoury pork cheek. Start your day with a local maritozzo, which is a sweet, yeasty bun containing raisins and pine nuts and filled with delicious whipped cream.



You could spend a whole day exploring the Vatican City and its beautiful art



People-watch and shoot candid pictures at the Spanish Steps

A trip to the ancient city is not complete without a visit here

THE SISTINE CHAPEL

Visit the official residence of the Pope situated in the Apostolic Palace. The stunning chapel was originally called Cappella Magna and was named after Pope Sixtus IV, who restored it between 1477 and 1480. You can book tickets in advance in order to skip the queues and secure entry into an often-sold-out venue. It's located within the Vatican Museums, and access to the Sistine Chapel is included with your museum tickets. The Sistine Chapel is the last room you'll visit on your trip through the museums and the 54 galleries. They truly leave the best until last on this tour. It's absolutely stunning and very memorable.

28 Marrakesh
page 48
-
29 Seychelles
page 50
-
30 Dubai
page 51
-
31 Sharm el-Sheik
page 52
-
32 Kilimanjaro
page 54
-
33 Cape Town
page 55
-
34 Zanzibar
page 56
-
35 Jerusalem
page 57
-
36 Masa Marai
page 58
-
37 Cape Verde
page 62
-
38 River Nile
page 63
-
39 Tel Aviv
page 64
-
40 Mauritius
page 65
-
41 Socotra Island
page 66
-
42 The Pyramids of Giza
page 67
-
43 Madagascar
page 68
-

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AFRICA & THE MIDDLE EAST

Marrakesh

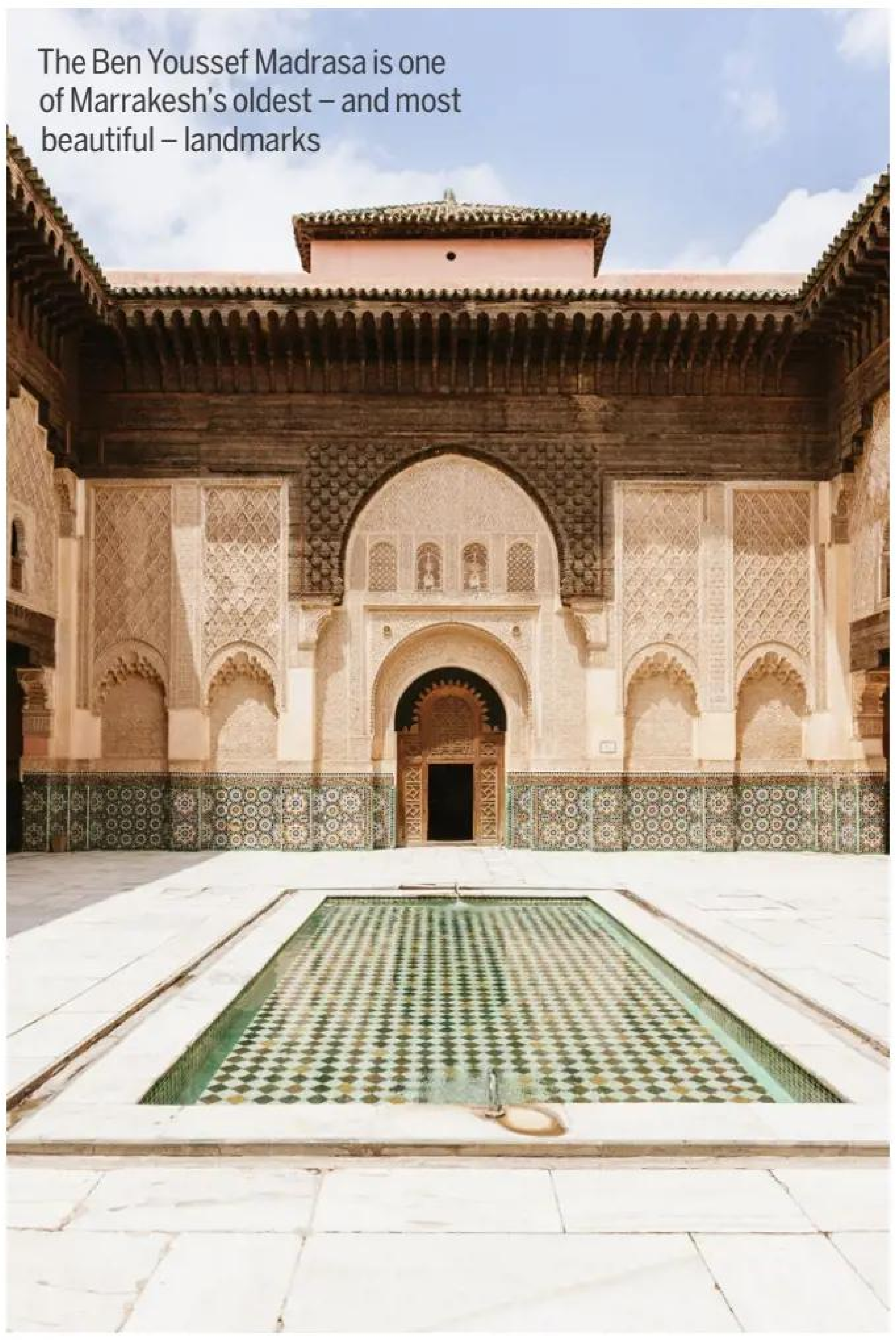
Get lost in Morocco's cultural capital in the Sahara sands

With its sand-coloured buildings, bustling streets and colourful markets, Marrakesh is Morocco's cultural jewel. Located in the shade of the stunning Atlas Mountains, at the very edge of the Sahara Desert, it has been home to a vast variety of people over the ages – from native Berbers to Arabs, as well as French colonisers and folk coming from all over Africa. The result is a real melting pot of influences – and it really shows.

Officially founded in the 11th century by the Almoravid Berber chieftain Abu Bakr ibn Umar, Marrakesh became a cultural centre, as its rulers erected a number of stunning mosques and madrasas (centres for Islamic learning). Over the years, its reputation spread across Africa, and people came from all over the continent to trade goods with each other.

Sticking up in the Marrakesh skyline is the minaret of the Koutoubia Mosque, located at the very centre of the city – Marrakesh seems to sprawl out around it. If you think you've seen it before, you probably have – the minaret served as an inspiration for La Giralda's cathedral spire in Seville. Opened in the 12th century, it was built next to the king's residence, and designed so that nosy worshippers couldn't get a look into his private quarters from the minaret. Inside, there are six rooms, each with its own architectural style. The grounds of the mosque feature destroyed ancient foundations (with information boards to tell their story), as well as expansive gardens with tall palm trees fanning the pathways.

Seeking to build upon Marrakesh's lofty reputation as an intellectual hub, Saadian dynasty sultan Abdallah al-Ghalib embarked on a massive construction project in 1565: the Ben Youssef Madrasa. At the time, it was the largest Islamic study centre in all Morocco, said to accommodate up to 800 students. As well as Quranic teachings, students learned about


The Ben Youssef Madrasa is one of Marrakesh's oldest – and most beautiful – landmarks

The Koutoubia Mosque really stands out on the skyline, as local law prohibits any new buildings from standing taller than it

Essential information

Unless you're really confident and don't mind traffic, don't attempt to drive in Marrakesh city centre.

Best time to visit

Before Ramadan, or September/October (to avoid the worst of the heat)

Time zone

UTC+1

CURRENCY

د.م.

MOROCCAN DIRHAM

Useful sites

VISITMARRAKECH.COM
MOROCCOTOURISMOFFICE.COM
JARDINMAJORELLE.COM/ANG

If you're short of time, the Menara Gardens are right next to the airport, so make a good first or last excursion in the city

TRY TO GRAB A GOOD DEAL BY GIVING HAGGLING A GO AT THE FAMOUS SOUK

literature, history and science. The buildings are centred around a stunningly symmetrical courtyard, featuring a classically Moroccan reflecting pool, and the walls are adorned with beautiful Islamic geometric patterns. Besides the educational buildings, you can also look around the student living quarters, perhaps to see how they compare with modern-day dorms. Much better, probably.

Built by Abdallah al-Ghalib's successor, Ahmad al-Mansur, the El Badi Palace ruins are another must-see. In its heyday, the palace was easily the grandest in the city, built using costly materials such as onyx and gold. Archaeologists estimate that the palace once had 360 rooms, playing host to political intrigues, private scandals and foreign dignitaries from far and wide. After the fall of the Saadian dynasty, their Alaouite successors stripped the palace of anything valuable, and left it to rot. Today, its ruins are carefully preserved.

Follow Ahmad al-Mansur to the grave by visiting the Saadian tombs, another major landmark on the Marrakesh trail. The tombs are the final resting place of al-Mansur and his family, as well as some servants and soldiers. Constructed from dazzling Italian marble, it's surprising to learn that these beautiful royal tombs were hidden from the world for centuries. The Saadians' vanquishers, the Alaouites, were keen to downplay their predecessors' influence, so the tombs were walled up. The only way to get to them was through a small passageway in the Kasbah Mosque, accessible only to a few. However, thanks to newly invented aerial photography, the tombs were discovered from above in 1917. Since then, they've been lovingly restored to their former glory, and you're able to wander around them at your leisure.

Marrakesh's rulers, no matter which dynasty they hailed from, seem to have been avid gardeners. They built many lovely green spaces throughout the city. Arguably the most famous of these is the Menara botanical gardens, a little way out of the city centre – right next to the airport, in fact. Among the fruit orchards and olive trees, a golden Saadian-era pavilion overlooks a rectangular reflecting pool. It's best to visit the Menara gardens in the evening, if you can – that way, you'll see the gardens bathed in a warm sunset glow. On a clear day, you'll be able to see the snow-capped Atlas Mountains in the background – the perfect spot for taking some great photos.

Jump forward in time a few centuries to capture a shot of your own at one of Marrakesh's most-Instagrammed landmarks, the Bahia Palace. Walk through its halls to experience all the different eras in Marrakesh's past – although the palace was built in the 19th century, its builder, Si Moussa, wanted to showcase the best of his country's history. Inside, you'll find a homage to traditional Moroccan styles, including sandstone walls, geometric marble rooms and colourful Islamic art. The gardens are even better – there are a number of courtyards filled with palm trees, water features and brightly coloured stained-glass windows to admire. The pièce de résistance, however, is the final courtyard, a vast expanse of intricate tiling; blue, yellow and red ceiling decorations; and picturesque fountains scattered with delicate petals. You could easily spend an entire afternoon here, soaking up the sun and revelling in the greatness of Moroccan design.

For a taste of modernist Marrakesh, step inside the walled Majorelle Gardens – otherwise known as the Yves Saint-Laurent gardens, after the famous French designer led efforts to restore the gardens in the 1980s. Originally laid out in the 1930s, the gardens, known for their trademark cobalt buildings and terracotta pathways, are unique because they blend traditional Moroccan landscaping with unmistakeably European architecture. The bright-blue Cubist villa (which now houses the Berber museum) at the top of the gardens looks like it would be more at home on the French Riviera than in Marrakesh. Still, you'll never forget the incredible colour scheme and botany on show here.

Last but certainly not least on the Marrakesh itinerary is a trip to the famous souk – and we suggest you do save it until last, otherwise you might spend all your money here! Entering from Jemaa el-Fnaa square, apparently Africa's busiest square, explore the endless narrow passageways packed full of exciting goods and wares. As well as standard souvenirs, you'll find all manner of spices, food, traditional cooking items (yes, including tagines), furniture, clothing and even books here. Try to grab a good deal by giving haggling a go – but be warned, Marrakesh's market sellers drive a hard bargain!

The Jardin Majorelle was one of Yves Saint-Laurent's favourite Marrakesh haunts

MODERN MARRAKESH

Although Marrakesh's old character is part of its charm, you can also take advantage of the city's modern side. As well as top-of-the-range hotels with rooftop pools and romantic spots ideal for sipping cocktails, you'll also find an array of cultural pleasures to take your fancy. Visit the House of Photography to learn more about this useful art, or the Yves Saint-Laurent Museum to find out about the notable designer.

Or, if you tire of souk shopping and want nothing more than to grab a coffee and hit up the boutiques, visit the Carré Eden shopping mall in the modern neighbourhood of Gueliz. You'll find it close to Marrakesh's shiny new train station, built in 2008.

To end your day in modern-day Marrakesh, enjoy one of Morocco's best-known pastimes: a visit to the hammam. Though these spas have their origins in Ottoman bathing, their popularity in Morocco has soared, in part thanks to the country's tourist boom. Enjoy a massage for a fraction of the price you'd pay at home, then take a dip in a blue pool, surrounded by sensual aromas and ambient lighting.

Praslin, second largest of the Seychelles, is home to the outstanding beach at Anse Lazio

Essential information

Exchange currency only with authorised banks and dealers, never individuals, to avoid counterfeiters and criminal activity.

Best time to visit

May to September (for sailing) or October and December (for festivals)

Time zone

UTC+4

CURRENCY

₨

SEYCHELLES RUPEE

Useful sites

SEYCHELLES.TRAVEL/EN

WWW.NATIONSONLINE.ORG/ONEWORLD/SEYCHELLES.HTM

AFRICAODYSSEY.COM/SEYCHELLES

29

Seychelles

A cultural crossroads off East Africa, the Seychelles offer sun, sand and entertainment

One of the world's most cosmopolitan experiences awaits visitors to the Seychelles islands, a cluster of 115 spits of land strewn across the Indian Ocean off the coast of East Africa. Tourism became the leading force in the Seychelles economy in the 1970s, and a burst of development to cater to visitors has brought focus to their diversity of culture, wildlife, natural beauty and entertainment.

Finding a diversion in the Seychelles is easy. Fair winds and following seas that once brought traders from Europe, Africa and Asia now facilitate a host of water sports, including diving and snorkelling, charter excursions and sun-splashed days on the inviting sandy beaches.

Meanwhile, the heritage of numerous cultures blends a colourful tapestry of experience. The cultural diversity of the Seychelles is expressed in many ways, including through music, a fusion of traditional sounds and instruments, which made their way to the islands through the centuries. Also popular is dance, an ebb and flow of fluid movement that beckons spectators to join in. If you can watch a traditional show, it's definitely worth it to get a real feel for island life. You can also see the cultural mix through its cuisine, matchless in character, flavour and the spice of island living.

More than 40 of the Seychelles islands are uninhabited, and half their land is designated as nature preserve and national park territory. The islands are home to two UNESCO World Heritage Sites. Vallée de Mai, on the island of Praslin, is revered by some as the original location of the fabled Garden of Eden; while Aldabra, one of the Seychelles' outer landmasses, is the world's largest raised coral atoll. The Seychelles are home to a multitude of diverse animal species existing in fragile ecosystems, including exotic and flightless birds, small frogs and other amphibians, and large land tortoises. Ecotourism thrives, and visitors may take advantage of options on land and in the ocean.

The hub of the Seychelles is the capital city of Victoria, on the island of Mahé, largest in the archipelago, where nearly 90 per cent of the population resides. Seychelles International Airport in Victoria serves as the gateway for the majority of visitors. Along with beautiful beaches, Mahé is home to several national parks. Its forests are world famous and include endemic species known to exist only in the Seychelles. The Festival Kreol, a Creole celebration, occurs annually in October, while the SUBIOS Underwater Festival, a celebration of the seas, takes place on Mahé each December.

Hotel accommodations are available across Mahé, and numerous options are also popular on Praslin, the second-largest island, located 44 kilometres (27 miles) northeast of Mahé. A variety of experiences, including high-rise hotels and all-inclusive resorts, provide plenty of choices. Anse Lazio, on the northeast shore of Praslin, is considered one of the best beaches in the Seychelles and offers stunning vistas of nearby granite rock formations. However, unlike other beaches in the Seychelles, Anse Lazio is not surrounded by a coral reef.

Getting around is facilitated via buses, rental cars, inter-island air services and ferries. Distances between the most popular islands are relatively short, and travel time is reasonable.

Dubai

30

Technology and tradition converge in the United Arab Emirates' dreamy desert metropolis

Gazing out over Dubai's skyline, an eclectic array of megalithic skyscrapers jutting through the clouds, it is hard to imagine this megacity began as a sleepy fishing village. To most visitors, the city is a land of awe and opulence, a shopper's paradise and a spectacle that must be seen to be believed.

One of seven emirates, or states, in the United Arab Emirates, Dubai straddles the coast of the Arabian Gulf, with swathes of meticulously designed luxury hotels and resorts on hand to cater to every whim and desire. You are only ever a stone's throw away from architectural marvels – from the world's tallest building, Burj Khalifa, to The Dubai Mall at its feet, home to more than 1,500 shops and restaurants.

However, beyond the expected glitz and glamour lies an even more enthralling world of adventure for those who seek it. Inland, the desert stretches out, an ocean of sand, dotted with scant bursts of bushes and trees. Dubai's wandering Bedouin nomads once called this land home, carrying on thousands of years of tradition in the forms of poetry, falconry and the ancient art of Arabian hospitality.

Though the desert is rich in oryx, desert foxes, snakes and mice, to the ancient Emirati, the peregrine falcon has always been man's best friend – a relationship that endures to this day, as hunters train their birds of prey with drones.

Despite the encroachment of modernity, coffee remains as it always has been: a ritualistic act, steeped in tradition. Historically, deals were made and alliances forged over steaming cups in the majlis, a space used to socialise. Modern visitors can enjoy this experience in the open desert, underneath the twinkling stars.

More adventurous types can venture into the wadis, or valleys, of the Al-Hajar Mountains – the highest in the Arabian Peninsula. Set against this dramatic backdrop is the oasis town of Hatta, home to historic forts, watchtowers and traditional irrigation systems.

Though rainfall is sparse in the region, it collects in the neighbouring gullies, aided by local dams, which make the perfect place for some mountaineering, biking or even just a spot of camping, amid the patter of leaping goat hooves, with food on an open fire.

Back in the city, the Old Town sits along the Creek, often seen to delineate 'old' and 'new' Dubai. Ironically, Al-Fahidi Historical Neighbourhood is on the 'new' side, a labyrinthine network of homes. Traditionally, houses were built of coral and limestone, held together with a mortar of seashells and lime. These featured wind towers and courtyards, to aid air circulation. Today, they host a variety of shops, art galleries and cafés, a quiet contrast to bustling Deira on the other side of the Creek. Here, wooden dhows stock up on electronics, car parts and other goods, to ship to India and Africa, bringing back food and livestock.

Contrary to popular belief, Dubai is a land of bold contrasts, where loud and quiet meet sand, stone and sea, and where people converge from all over the world. The result is a delicate harmony of mesmerising peaks and enchanting troughs well worth visiting.

Dubai's skyline displays an eclectic array of megalithic skyscrapers

Essential information

Be sure to look into the local customs; though it is progressive, the UAE is a Muslim country.

Best time to visit

October to March (for cool weather and sunny skies)

Time zone

UTC+4

CURRENCY

د.إ

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES DIRHAM

Useful sites

WWW.VISITDUBAI.COM
WWW.PLATINUM-HERITAGE.COM
WWW.ARABIAN-ADVENTURES.COM

Sharm el-Sheikh

Fly into Egypt's prime holiday destination for thrilling coral reef diving and beaches galore

Sharm el-Sheikh is located at the southern tip of the Sinai Peninsula, and with a dedicated airport, this is the perfect place to kick back by the pool, visit historical sites, practise your haggling skills and even learn how to scuba dive.

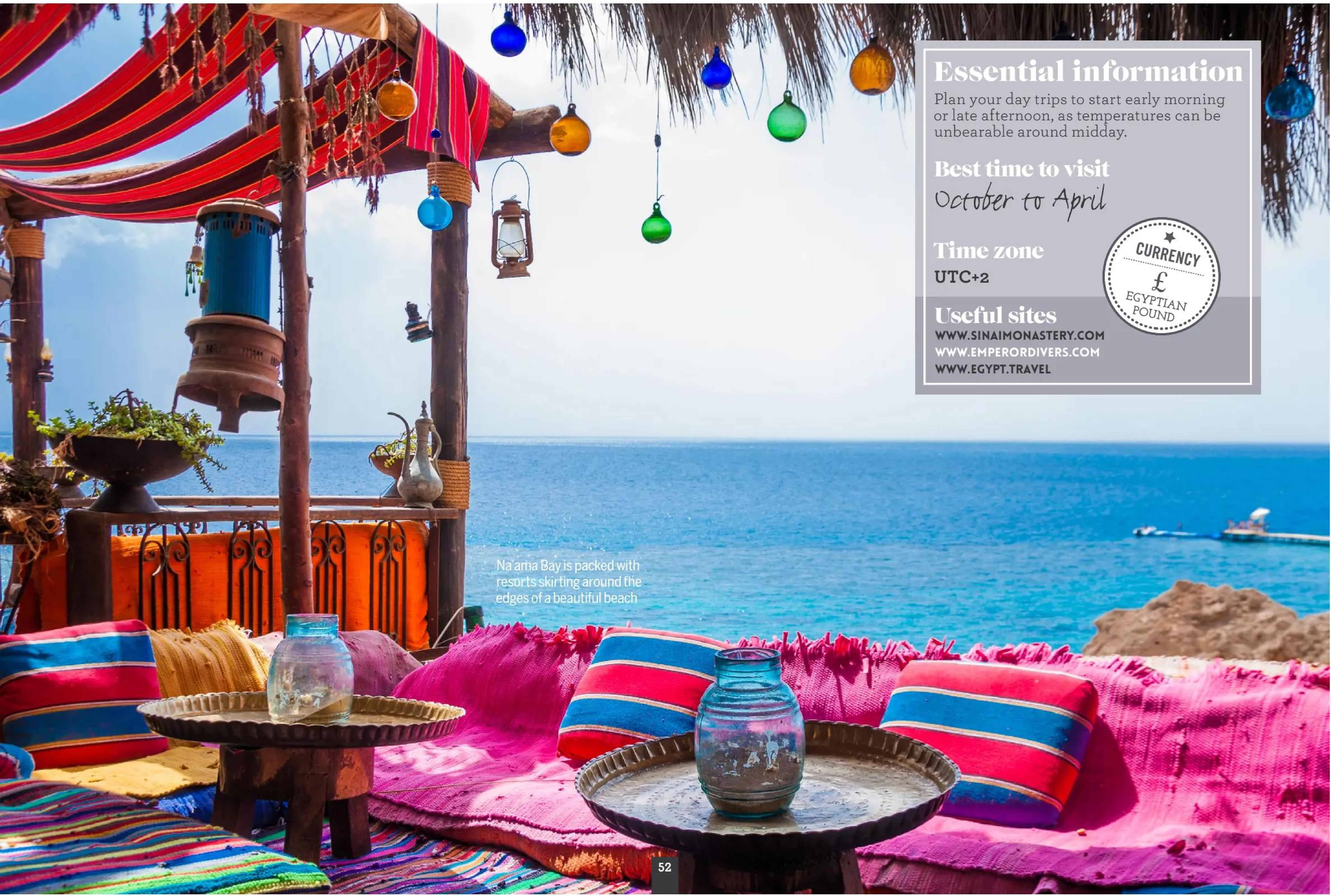
Na'ama Bay is at the heart of Sharm el-Sheikh's beach life. Take a stroll on to the hot, white sands and dip your feet in the warm waters for complete relaxation. The midday heat, however, can become intense with temperatures reaching 30 to 40 degrees Celsius (86 to 104 degrees Fahrenheit) in the summer months of July and August, so visiting the beach early morning is recommended. Reaching out directly from a strip of luxury hotels and resorts, Na'ama Bay is renowned for its range of cafes and shops, with many sellers attempting to draw you in to peruse the goods. Na'ama Bay is also a great spot for snorkelling, with coral reefs lining the waters – this makes for an ideal introduction to snorkelling before heading out further afield.

A holiday to Sharm el-Sheikh should not go without a trip to the Ras Muhammad National Park, just 38 kilometres (23 miles) further south along the peninsula. This area of natural beauty features a selection of impressive dive sites that makes snorkelling and scuba diving a top attraction for visitors. Head to the Shark Observatory, close to Main Beach, for incredible views over the surrounding area (the chances of spotting sharks, however, are very slim). Another great spot for snorkelling is Marsa Bareika Beach, with its calm waters and sandy beaches making it ideal for beginners and also perfect for families and young children. Go to Salt Lake for a spot of swimming, and then head to Old Quay Beach or Jolanda Bay for some excellent coral reef diving. On your way out, drive by the Mangroves and see how the vegetation sprawls out into the crystal-clear waters of the Red Sea.

For one of the best beach experiences Sharm el-Sheikh has to offer, and a much quieter location compared to that of the busier Na'ama Bay, head to Ras Um Sid just five kilometres (three miles) to the south of the main town. This spot is the perfect snorkelling location for those looking for a more casual coral reef experience, with some amazing sea life and rare fish species waiting to be seen. Don't miss out on the most exciting diving experience on the Sinai Peninsula: the Thistlegorm wreck. This is the site of a British army freighter that sank during World War II. It has been well preserved in the salt water of the Red Sea. Ideal for more experienced divers, the Thistlegorm site is located 33 metres (108 feet) down on the seabed, featuring motorbikes, cars, trucks and many more items within the ship's holds. Towards the stern of the ship, get up close to the turrets and machine guns as well as the ship's large propeller at the rear. Book yourself on a full-day boat trip with prices starting at around £70 ($91), or a two-day trip with a night's stay on a boat (the latter includes a night dive of the wreck). This is truly a wondrous site to behold and is the perfect opportunity for those looking to experience a bit more than just sea life.

Once you've got a taste for dive sites, chances are you'll want to head over to Tiran Island, accessible by boat just six kilometres (four miles) off the coast of Sharm el-Sheikh. Although the island belongs to Saudi Arabia, it is actually part of the Ras Muhammad National Park. Visitors are invited to dive and snorkel around the island to experience the array of amazing coral reefs, clear waters and another impressive shipwreck.

If you're planning to spend more of your time in Sharm el-Sheikh on dry land, there's a plethora of locations to visit further inland. Book a trip further afield to Colored Canyon, situated northward up the Sinai Peninsula coastline. Walk



Na'ama Bay is packed with resorts skirting around the edges of a beautiful beach

Essential information

Plan your day trips to start early morning or late afternoon, as temperatures can be unbearable around midday.

Best time to visit

October to April

Time zone

UTC+2

CURRENCY
£
EGYPTIAN POUND

Useful sites

WWW.SINAIMONASTERY.COM
WWW.EMPERORDIVERS.COM
WWW.EGYPT.TRAVEL

Saint Catherine's Monastery is believed to be one of the world's oldest working monasteries

> THERE'S SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE HERE, NO MATTER YOUR BUDGET

through the 800-metre (2,600-foot) canyon around glowing orange pinnacles and amazing boulders. This place offers itself as an ideal photography location for stunning sunrise and sunset shots, capturing the dramatic landscape and colours from the rock surfaces.

Saint Catherine's Monastery, located more centrally on the Sinai Peninsula, is considered to be one of the oldest working monasteries in the world. Located 210 kilometres (130 miles) from Sharm el-Sheikh, a day's tour can be organised from most resorts. Tour prices start at £33 ($43), with optional extras that include hikes to the summit of Mount Sinai at sunrise for some incredible panoramic views. Remember when visiting the site that appropriate dress codes must be considered, including no shorts or exposed skin over shoulders. The monastery houses some of the most renowned religious icons in the world, attracting both tourists and pilgrims from all over the world who come and pay their respects.

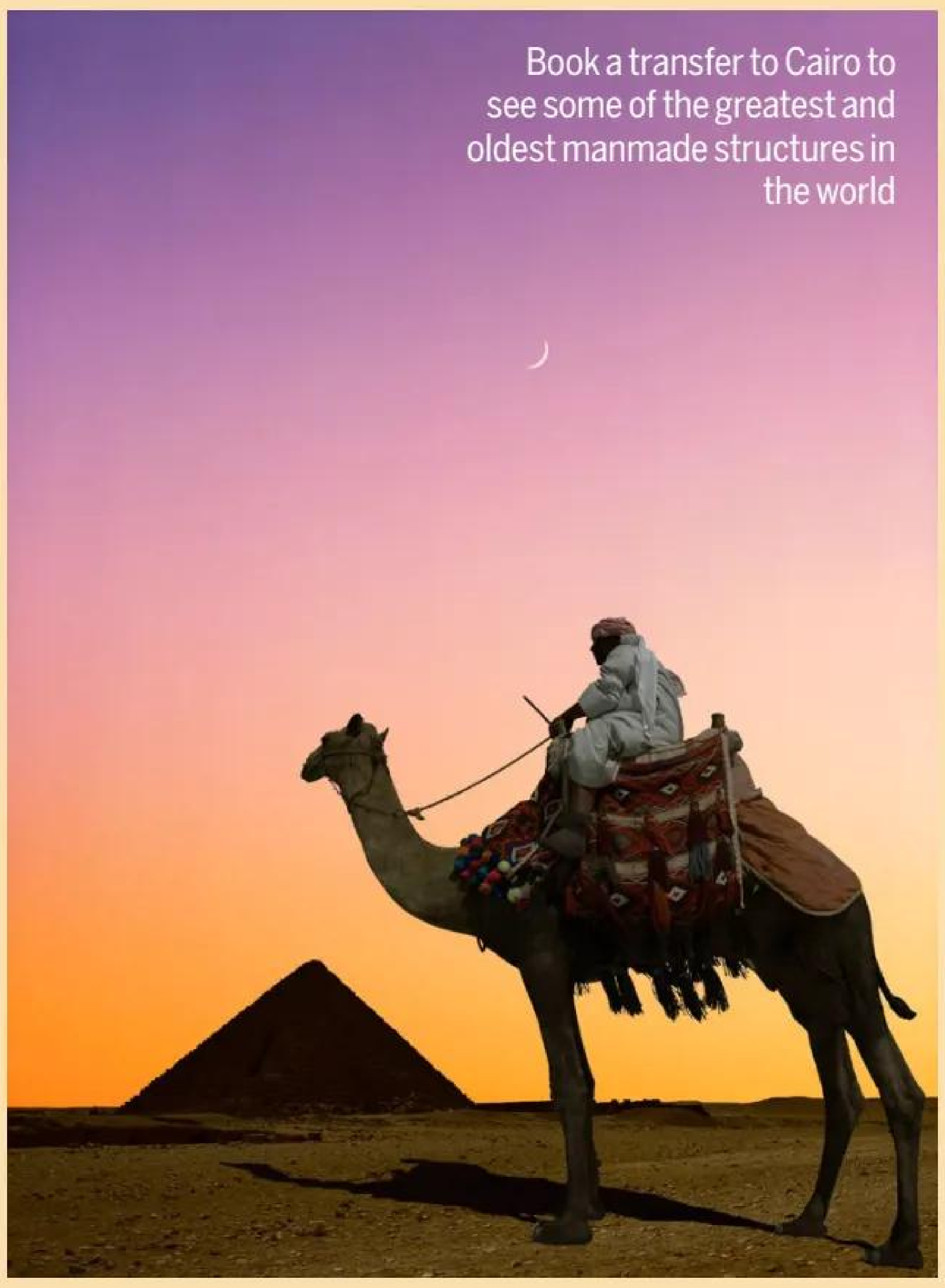
Camel riding is a favourite among visitors to Sharm el-Sheikh, with tour operators offering camel safaris across the Sinai Desert. Usually lasting for an hour, expect to pay from £40 ($52) per person. After experiencing the slow and bumpy ride, most tour operators offer the chance for you to sample authentic local tea and food with Bedouin people as part of the tour. This is a great opportunity to get a better sense of what desert life is like for the local people.

Take a day to explore the local bazaars and markets of Sharm el-Sheikh and pick up a souvenir or two at the Old Market; or pay a visit to Soho Square (opened in 2018) for award-winning entertainment and a plethora of restaurants. When you're not dining out, Soho Square features an ice rink, bowling alley and tennis courts to keep kids and adults entertained throughout the day.

There's truly something for everyone in Sharm el-Sheikh, no matter what your budget may be. Whether you're after a relaxing time away from home chilling on the beach, or a more adventurous trip in which you can push your scuba-diving skills, or explore some natural wonders, there's so much to do that you'll want to book a flight straight back there.

Scuba diving is one of the top things to do in Sharm el-Sheikh, with amazing coral reefs and sea life

Make sure you experience a camel ride into the desert while in Egypt



Book a transfer to Cairo to see some of the greatest and oldest manmade structures in the world

DAY TRIPS TO CAIRO

Sharm el-Sheikh makes for the perfect base for exploring, with fantastic beaches, shopping and entertainment available within close range. But it's also possible to take a trip out to the country's capital of Cairo, where you can marvel at major sites including one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Great Pyramid of Giza, and then take a walk across to the incredible Sphinx. Don't miss out on a visit to the city's impressive Egyptian Museum to learn about Ancient Egypt – it's here where you can view the largest collection of artefacts in the world. Depending on your budget, Cairo can be reached either by a direct flight from Sharm el-Sheikh that will take just one hour, or by a bus transfer that will take five to six hours either way, winding through the Sinai Peninsula.

Kilimanjaro

Tanzania's mighty Mount Kilimanjaro is a friendly giant even novice hikers can conquer

Stretching 5,895 metres (19,340 feet) above sea level, not only is Mount Kilimanjaro Africa's tallest peak, it's the highest free-standing mountain on Earth. Instantly recognisable, the solitary snow-capped massif erupts suddenly from the flat Tanzanian plains, looming strikingly high above the acacia forests and scrublands.

Technically a dormant volcano, which erupted from the surrounding savannah more than one million years ago, Kilimanjaro has been seducing travellers for decades. Since no technical skill is required to get to its peak, it gives uninitiated climbers the extraordinary opportunity to reach one of the world's seven summits.

To the soundtrack of birdsong, trekkers voyage from the emerald-green forests, overflowing with ferns, sycamore trees and junipers. Utterly mesmerising, the changing landscape takes explorers through five different ecosystems, and an evolving display of exotic flora, fauna and wildlife. Giant trees gilded in usnea, or 'old man's beard', offer brief shade to the delicate flowering buds of St John's wort. Overhead boubous, green wood hoopoes and silvery cheeked hornbills call the Tanzanian mountain home. As do blue monkeys and olive baboons, leopards, mongooses and elephants. But, given the foot-traffic, sightings are extremely rare. Ascending, the wildlife diminishes, replaced with loose scree, rock walls and glaringly blue glaciers, until the otherworldly moonscapes of Kilimanjaro's highest point, Uhuru Peak, are in sight. Standing on the summit before the iconic sign, there's only the briefest of moments to bask in the whipping winds, carrying the pink morning clouds ever closer.

A geological behemoth, and one of Africa's most awe-inspiring sights, every adventurer worth their salt dreams of standing on the Roof of Africa. More than 20,000 attempt to conquer its summit each year, using one of its seven routes – Marangu, Machame, Rongai, Lemosho, Shira, Umbwe and Mweka – though not all are recommended to tackle.

The oldest and most direct of all Kilimanjaro routes, the 35-kilometre (22-mile) Marangu passes through vast grasslands and cacti fields before winding across alpine meadows, set against dramatic mountain peaks. The only route with hut accommodation – the others require you to take your own tents – it's a cheaper trail, but given the limited acclimatisation period, has lower success rates.

Popular, despite being longer and more arduous then Marangu or Rongai, the Machame route encourages gradual acclimatisation – giving trekkers longer to adapt by climbing high and sleeping low. The trail passes through lowland forests, moorland and arid deserts, before pushing onto the glacial fields and icy precipices of the snow-crowned Kibo. The 40-kilometre (25-mile) route is steep, but remarkably scenic.

Snaking across the north-eastern side of the mountain, Rongai attracts fewer climbers than the other routes, given its remote starting point at the Kenyan border. The seven-to-eight-day trail offers up solitude, wilderness and wildlife, as antelope, elephant and buffalo roam these parts. Wandering through rural heartlands, it provides a rare opportunity to witness traditional Chaga village life first-hand.

Not technically a route, the Northern Circuit is a combination of existing trails designed for the crowd-averse. The 86-kilometre (53-mile), little-known detour is the longest, but quietest way to Uhuru, if time and money are no object. Commencing at Lemosho, it traverses the north side of the mountain, approaching the summit via Gilman's Point.

Kilimanjaro's summit, Uhuru Peak, is the highest point in Africa, and one of its most spectacular sights

Essential information

Remember the word 'pole', meaning 'slow down', which porters use to warn trekkers against altitude sickness.

Best time to visit

March or October (to avoid crowds and bad weather)

Time zone

UTC+3

CURRENCY

TSh

TANZANIAN SHILLING

Useful sites

WWW.TANZANIATOURISM.GO.TZ
WWW.KILIPORTERS.ORG
WWW.GLADYSADVENTURE.COM

Cape Town

South Africa's Mother City is one of the best of all world travel experiences

Located at the southern tip of South Africa, Cape Town is one of the most stunningly diverse cities in the world. Where else could you swim with penguins, climb an iconic mountain and visit vineyards all in one day?

Cape Town is possibly most famous for the truly unique Table Mountain – a one-kilometre (0.6-mile) high mountain whose most distinguishing feature is a flat summit that stretches for 3.2 kilometres (two miles). The sheer size of the mountaintop, the rugged terrain and the wildlife make it easy to forget you're not on the ground, but instead on South Africa's smallest mountain. Table Mountain is ideal for nature lovers, as it is home to a wider range of unique flora and fauna than anywhere else in the world. A walk around Table Mountain is a truly unforgettable sight, and the cable car to the top is cheap, quick and safe.

Once you've finished your mountain climbing, you may be in need of a dip in the ocean, so a trip to Boulders Beach is in order – as long as you don't mind sharing. That's because Boulders is home to hundreds of African penguins! There is nowhere else in the world you can get this close to these magnificent birds in the wild.

All that exercise may have left you needing a drink – so where better than Stellenbosch? The vineyards are a 45-minute drive from the city in perhaps South Africa's most well-known wine-producing region, boasting internationally-renowned Cabernet Sauvignon and Pinotage.

If you've gone all the way to Cape Town, why not head to the place that gave it its name – the Cape of Good Hope. This point at the south-western tip of Africa has a fearsome reputation among sailors, but provides tourists with a stunning view of the point where the Atlantic Ocean meets the Indian Ocean – with the added advantage of a possibility of a whale sighting.

But what of the city itself? History buffs simply have to schedule in a visit to Robben Island, the prison in which Nelson Mandela was held for 18 years. Tours are conducted by former inmates, many of whom were there at the same time as the former president.

The Castle of Good Hope is also a gorgeous piece of architecture. Sports fans can take in a Test match at the spectacular Newlands Cricket Stadium, while foodies must head to the Old Biscuit Mill, which houses a number of top-class restaurants including the Test Kitchen, voted Africa's best restaurant in 2018.

Put simply, there is nowhere in the world quite like Cape Town that has so much to offer every kind of traveller. The adventurer, the nature-lover, the wine buff, the city breaker and the beach-bum can all spend a magical time in South Africa's vibrant coastal gem.

Essential information

Muggings are commonplace in Cape Town, so stay in populated areas.

Best time to visit

January to March

Time zone

UTC+2

CURRENCY

R

SOUTH AFRICAN RAND

Useful sites

WWW.CAPETOWN.TRAVEL
WWW.COMETOCAPETOWN.COM/TOP-10-REASONS-VISIT-CAPE-TOWN
WWW.CAPETOWNMAGAZINE.COM

The low clouds around Table Mountain are called the Tablecloth, for obvious reasons

Zanzibar

This eclectic tropical paradise, a region of Tanzania, is simply unlike anywhere else in the world

Known as Spice Island, the honeymoon destination of Zanzibar may be famous for its turquoise waters and pristine white beaches, but this multicultural melting pot has plenty to spice up your life.

The archipelago in the Indian Ocean, just off the coast of Tanzania, comprises over 50 islands, but the main ones are Unguja and Pemba. Unguja, commonly known as Zanzibar, is the largest and is popular with tourists for its stunning beaches and capital city Stone Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site and the birthplace of Freddie Mercury. The 'Green Island' is a fitting name for Pemba, which is covered in lush-green forest and clove plantations – 70 per cent of the world's cloves are produced here. Zanzibar's second-largest island is also one of the best spots for diving and snorkelling. It may be quieter than Unguja with fewer hotels, but one resort that gets a lot of attention is the Manta Resort, which boasts an underwater room offshore.

The smaller islands also have their draws. Chumbe, Zanzibar's first Marine Protected Area, is a wildlife haven; watch humpback whales during migration, search for endangered coconut crabs or the rare Aders's duiker. The Chumbe Island Eco Lodge is the island's only accommodation. There are just seven bungalows, so you have privacy and spectacular views.

There are only ten rooms on the remote and luxurious Mnemba Atoll as it's just 500 metres (1,640 feet) in diameter, but you'll have to splash out to stay here. The reefs in this marine conservation area are stunning and you can see turtles during breeding season.

If you're searching for paradise, the best beaches on the main island are Nungwi and Kendwa in the north, Matemwe in the northeast and Bwejuu in the southeast. While Pemba and Mnemba are the best locations for diving and snorkelling, there are plenty of spots off the main island including Kizimkazi reef and Stone Town reef. If you don't dive, there are plenty of water sports from kitesurfing to deep-sea fishing.

Its waters may be rich in marine life, but there's plenty more to see. Visit the Jozani Forest to see red colobus monkeys, one of Africa's rarest primates, or go to see Aldabra giant tortoises on Prison Island.

The archipelago's real charm lies in its rich culture. Once a major trade route, Zanzibar represents a mix of cultures from Africa, the Middle East, India, Persia and Europe, and these influences can be seen in its food, architecture and customs. Visit Lukmaan restaurant to try local curry and samosas, or go to the Forodhani Gardens for fresh seafood and sugar cane juice. The Rock restaurant's unique offshore location makes it a diner's dream.

Stone Town's architecture highlights the blend of cultures, from Anglican churches to Islamic mosques and Hindu temples. Look out for the incredible woodwork on the doors, showing off detailed workmanship.

Zanzibar has a number of festivals throughout the year, but highlights include the Sauti za Busara music festival and the Zanzibar International Film Festival.

Whether you're taking a dhow (traditional sailing boat) cruise to experience the breathtaking sunsets, or shopping for a kitenge (Swahili garment) at the Darajani Market, there's culture around every corner.

The history of Zanzibar is equally as fascinating, from spices to slavery. Visit the slave monument, the former slave market or David Livingstone's house to learn about Zanzibar's history as East Africa's biggest slave port. Then explore a plantation to discover how the country's wealth grew from common spices like cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg.

Take a tour of Stone Town for a deeper insight into the island from the House of Wonders to the Old Fort and Palace Museum. Other landmarks include the Old Dispensary, the Persian Baths and, of course, Freddie Mercury's house.

You may go for the beaches, but Zanzibar's unique mix of gems is what will really rock you.

The Jozani Forest is home to one of Africa's rarest primates, the red colobus monkey

Essential information

If you want to take photographs of locals in Zanzibar, be sure to ask for permission beforehand.

Best time to visit

December to February or June to October (dry season)

Time zone

UTC+3

Currency

TSh
TANZANIAN SHILLING

Useful sites

SAFARIBLUE.NET
WWW.ANDBEYOND.COM/DESTINATIONS/AFRICA/TANZANIA
WWW.SCUBAFISHZANZIBAR.COM

Jerusalem

DO NOT TRAVEL
See p.4 for more information

Visit Israel and you really ought to travel to Jerusalem – the world's most religious city

A sacred site in Judaism, Christianity and Islam, there is no doubting the significance that Jerusalem holds. It is, in a multitude of ways, a city like no other: one that bristles with religion and history, while being at the centre of an almighty tug-of-war between Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

As many will know, both claim Jerusalem as their capital and there has been greater tension of late as the United States has come down on Israel's side. So is Jerusalem a safe place to visit? Yes. But should you take care? Undoubtedly so, especially in East Jerusalem, which includes the Old City and some of the greatest must-see attractions.

The Old City is very important. Until 1860, this was Jerusalem and you can easily spend your entire trip here, taking time to soak up the atmosphere in the narrow, winding streets as you move from one part to another, enjoying all that its Muslim, Christian, Armenian and Jewish quarters have to offer.

A central attraction, for want of a better word, is the Western Wall, a surviving section of the Temple Mount, which is the location of the First and Second Jewish Temples as cited in the Bible. Jews have congregated here for centuries, their tears flowing over a desire to rebuild Jerusalem following the destruction of the temples by the Romans. For that reason, it is also rather disparagingly nicknamed the Wailing Wall.

You'll certainly find lots of people congregating in the large plaza in front of the Wall, from where you'll also see Jews leaving paper wishes in the cracks of the limestone. From there, however, it's advisable to enter the underground tunnel to get an idea of how the Old City was constructed. You should also go beyond the Wall: Muslims revere Temple Mount as the Haram al-Sharif, or Noble Sanctuary, and it is the home of the Dome of the Rock, a huge, ancient survivor of Islamic architecture. Adjacent is the al-Aqsa Mosque, but you need to be Muslim if you wish to enter.

For a greater sense of Jerusalem's history, you can visit the Tower of David, location of the Museum of the History of Jerusalem and close to Jaffa Gate, one of four entrances alongside Damascus, Dung and Lions. The views from the Tower (also known as the Jerusalem Citadel) will certainly impress, as will a visit to the Israel Museum, which houses the Dead Sea Scrolls. This is adjacent to the Bible Lands Museum, which examines the culture of populations referred to in the scriptures. Jerusalem is nothing if not eclectic.

Indeed, Christians – or those with a curiosity of Christianity – will no doubt want to visit the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Old City. It is said to be the site where Jesus of Nazareth was crucified and the location of his empty tomb. Jesus's path to crucifixion is plotted along the Via Dolorosa road that winds to the Church. It is marked by nine of the 14 stations of the Cross, with the other five inside the Church itself.

In visiting all of these sites, it is advisable to dress modestly and be respectful of religious customs. Away from them, however, you can afford to relax and you really ought to sample the amazing food. Hummus, pita, fresh raw vegetables and shawarma are abundant; if you think of Middle Eastern and Mediterranean cuisines, you're on the right lines. People are also friendly and welcoming, and the nightlife is diverse and bustling. There really is nowhere else like it on Earth.

A modern Jerusalem has emerged on the edge of the historic Old City

Essential information

The price of accommodation will inevitably rise during religious celebrations.

Best time to visit

April to May or
October to November

Time zone

UTC+2

CURRENCY
₪
ISRAELI NEW SHEKEL

Useful sites

WWW.ITRAVELJERUSALEM.COM
NEW.GOISRAEL.COM/AREA/JERUSALEM
WWW.GOJERUSALEM.COM

Masai Mara

Endless plains, abundant wildlife and the annual Great Migration, Kenya's Masai Mara may be small, but it's a bucket-list giant

Sweeping savannahs stretch until the edge of the world. The huge sun bursts across the horizon, and warm winds whip through flat-topped acacia trees, their barks gnarled and twisted. Atop, a vulture sits in wait, watching as a solitary lion saunters slowly through the long grass, self-assured and utterly focused.

Sitting in southwestern Kenya, bordering Tanzania's Serengeti, the Masai Mara National Reserve spans 1,510 square kilometres (589 square miles) of unspoiled wilderness. Here, vast oceans of golden grassland link murky swamps and riverine forests. A fragile haven for thousands of animals, the Mara, as it's known to locals, is home to gazelles, topi, zebras, impalas, buffaloes, giraffes and wildebeests. But its most famous residents are the much-heralded Big Five: lions, leopards, elephants, black rhinos and buffaloes.

Offering the best game and bird viewing not just in Kenya, but the entire continent, the national park bleeds into several community-owned conservancies and the ancestral lands of the indigenous Maasai people. A wildlife-laden land of sheer natural beauty, it sets the stage for one of the most spectacular shows on earth: the Great Migration. Each year, from July to October, about 1.5 million hungry wildebeests thunder 1,000 kilometres (621 miles) from Tanzania's Serengeti to Kenya's Masai Mara National Reserve in search of rich, red oat grass to graze on. While the primordial beasts are undoubtedly the stars of the show, almost one million zebras and 500,000 Thomson's gazelles join the mass exodus.

Essential information

Photography safaris offer early starts, state-of-the-art customised vehicles and plenty of time to observe, for the best shots.

Best time to visit

September to October (to experience the Great Migration without the crowds)

Time zone

UTC+3

CURRENCY
K
KENYAN SHILLING

Useful sites

WWW.MARATRIANGLE.ORG
WWW.MASAIMARANATIONALPARK.ORG
WWW.KATOKENYA.ORG

Maasai Warriors jump, as part of the ipid dance, each trying to leap higher than the others

Wave after wave, the zebras move first, navigating their way through the tall grass by instinct and memory. Wildebeests, both young and old, follow closely behind. The final frontier, the crocodile-infested Mara River, makes a treacherous, yet necessary, crossing point.

Hesitant, the herbivores pause, sometimes for days – then, all at once, make a choreographed dash to the other side. Thousands are eaten, drowned or crushed during the death-defying crossing. As the fastest, luckiest and most determined emerge from the water, the perilous journey isn't over. Lions lay in wait ready to attack, while hyenas, leopards and cheetahs trail the sea of beleaguered prey, picking off struggling stragglers.

The scene of opportunistic predators ripping apart exhausted wildebeests is not for the faint of heart. Grotesque and at the same time spectacular, it's a thrilling lesson in the circle of life and survival of the fittest. While the exact time of this natural wonder is determined by rainfall and grass growth, the entire period is one of never-ending action and relentless movement. Predators are plentiful and kills are common, especially during the early morning, late afternoon and under the cover of nightfall, as a soundtrack of groaning gnus, cackling hyenas and barking zebras takes hold.

While the big and small screens have made valiant attempts to do this spectacle justice, safaris are the only way to truly appreciate it. A concept born amid Kenya's plains, the word safari means 'journey' in Swahili.

Aside from the Great Migration, the compact boundaries of the Masai Mara offer prime safari territory all year round. Overflowing with wildlife, the park has recorded more than 100 mammal, amphibian and reptile species within its bounds.

The plains between the Mara River and the western Esoit Escarpment are best for big game viewing – especially the eagerly anticipated

The Masai Mara is home to more than 100 mammal, amphibian and reptile species

title match between lions and the world's fastest mammal: cheetahs. When these two big cats aren't going head to head, female cheetahs teach their young how to hunt – a necessary lesson of survival – by playing long, protracted games of cat and mouse with injured antelope.

Elsewhere, hyenas and vultures circle buffalo carcasses, reluctantly sharing their territory with the distinctive Masai giraffe, the world's largest subspecies. Topi, jackals, antelopes and bat-eared foxes can also be found here. Herds of 40 elephants – affectionately known as the 'gardeners of the savannah' – graze lazily, while hippopotamuses bathe in the muddy waters of the Mara and Talek rivers. Blue-bottomed baboons watch on from the safety of whistling thorn trees, as do hungry lionesses with cubs to feed – eyes fixed on their next meal. The vegetation-loving, bad-tempered black rhinos prefer the denser bushland of Ngama Hills or the Mara Triangle. One of Africa's most endangered species (just a few dozen remain in the Mara), sightings are rare, but all the more magical.

Not to be outdone, the Masai Mara's winged residents are just as impressive, with 540 bird species calling the Kenyan stretch home for at least part of the year. Kingfishers, marabou storks and fishing owls flit around the Mara River, while, close by, large flocks of mohawked crested guinea fowl seek refuge in the bank-side forests. Ostriches and hornbills hunt for fruit, as pairs of brightly coloured lilac-breasted rollers, the national bird of Kenya, perch gracefully atop branches – until the male takes off, rising to great heights before darting and diving towards the earth, letting out loud cries.

Foraging birds share the clear Kenyan skies with 57 raptor species, including the African fish eagle and African pygmy falcon, the continent's smallest raptor, as well as the lesser-known, but distinctive, secretary bird – a terrestrial hybrid with an eagle-like body and crane's legs. Vultures freewheel through the thermals, devouring the remains of hyenas, buffaloes and even lions. The park is also an opportunity for enthusiastic bird watchers to check the elusive yellow-mantled widowbirds, cinnamon-breasted rock buntings and purple grenadiers off their lists.

Towards the northeast of the park, the beautiful Loita Hills climb 2,150 metres (7,054 feet) from

THE MASAI MARA OFFERS PRIME SAFARI TERRITORY ALL YEAR ROUND

Early-morning hot air balloon rides are a novel way to track animals over large distances

dry flatlands to tangled jungle. While Loita, which translates to 'the forest of the lost child', remains relatively untouched by development, it's home to a large population of Maasai who protect the precious parcel. Teeming with wildlife, colobus monkeys swing overhead, as forest pigs and bushbuck forage for food – a rare living example of traditional cultures and wildlife coexisting in frangible harmony. These hills also bear witness to the annual Northern Migration, a smaller, but no less magnificent version of the Great Migration, where 300,000 zebras and wildebeests cross the Mara plains from the Loita Hills, come the first March rains.

For those keen to experience the wild expanse, there are few Loita lodges as idyllic as Jan's Camp. A resort of safari tents and rustic rooms, it sits beneath a canopy of trees, making it a desirable spot for birdwatchers. From here, Masai Trails offer hikes for those keen to explore the more remote reaches of Maasailand on foot. Routes vary from one-day circuits to the 12-day Great Maasailand Trail, which snakes through the Loita Hills before plunging down into Rift Valley and on to Lake Magadi – passing waterfalls, rock formations and watering holes.

Isolated from the rest of the park by the life-giving Mara River, the Mara Triangle enjoys few visitors and has only a couple of lodges within its bounds. Comprising a third of the reserve, thousands of animals graze on its plains, which sit between volcanic hills, swamps and streams, patrolled and protected by Mara Conservancy – a group of dedicated Maasai and conservationists.

Bordering the reserve are a number of private wildlife conservancies, including Mara Naboisho, Olare Orok, Mara North, Motorogi and Ol Kinyei, run by local communities. In return for leasing their ancestral land for the purpose of wildlife conservation, the Maasai enjoy grazing rights and a guaranteed income from visitors. Here, preservation is a community effort and education is as important as spotting the Big Five. As conservancies are closed to anyone not staying there, they remain largely uninhabited wildernesses – unlike the main national park – where guests can enjoy a more intimate experience, away from the crowds.

At conservancies, Maasai guides lead curious visitors on bush walks, where game is tracked using spoor (footprints) and scat (droppings). The chance of crossing paths with lions, elephants, hyenas, buffaloes, giraffes and rhinos makes this a heart-pounding experience, and one that is not permitted in the national reserve. Along the way, unusual bugs and plants, rarely noticed from a car, are discovered to a constant crescendo of crickets.

The Mara Naboisho Conservancy, a 50,000-acre plot bordering the Masai Mara National Reserve, is the second largest in the region, with an abundance of wildlife to rival any national park.

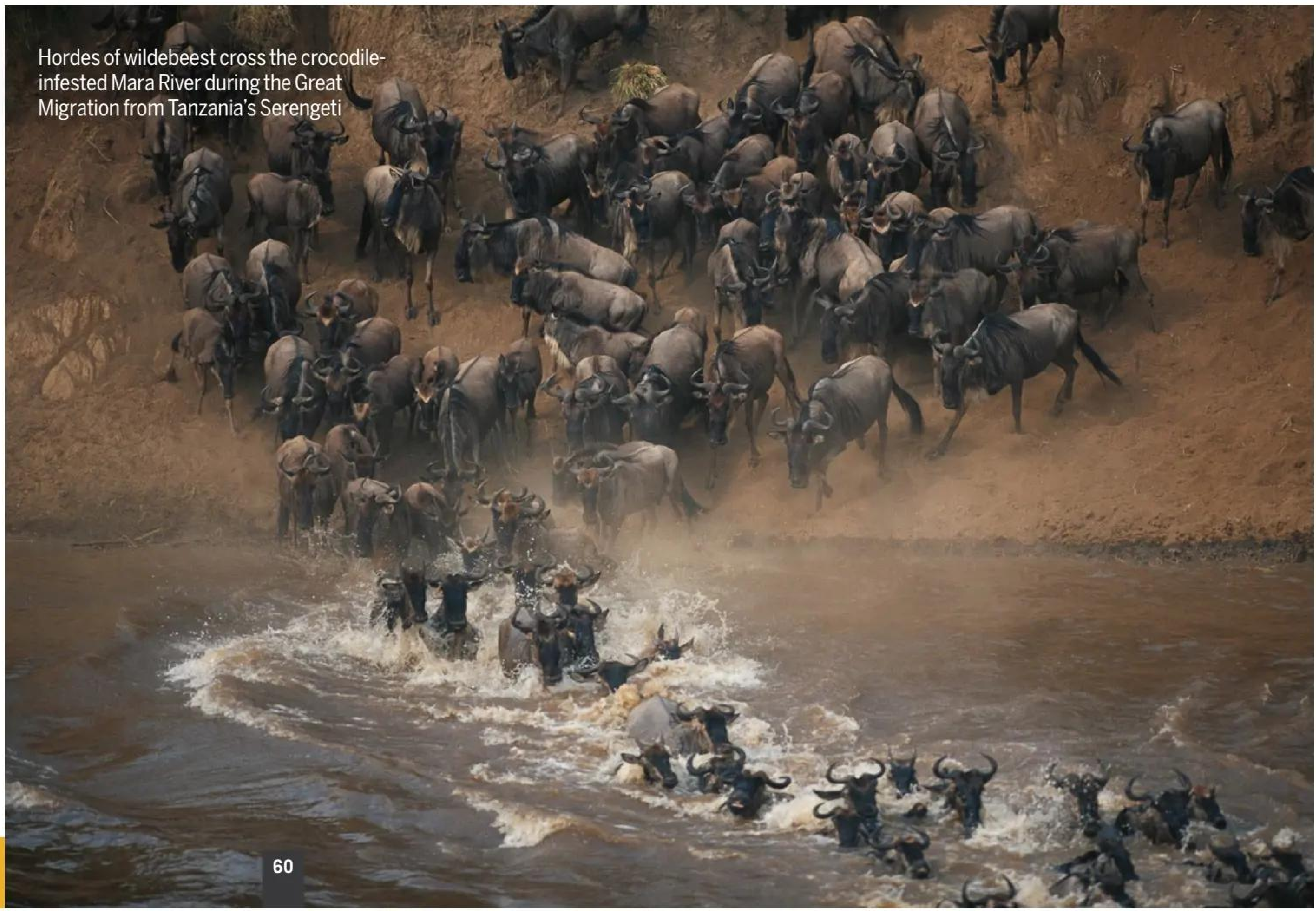
The fastest animal on earth, the cheetah can reach speeds of up to 112kph (70mph)

THE UGLY FIVE

Travellers to Masai Mara will likely be keen to tick off the Big Five, the most sought-after wildlife sightings in Africa, however few consider searching out the plain's more unlovable beasts – the scavengers and back-stabbers with violent reputations and horrible looks. Nicknamed the 'Ugly Five', the band of misfits includes the marabout stork, warthog, wildebeest, vulture and spotted hyena.

Known as 'The Undertaker' due to its hunched posture and jet-black 'cloak', it's believed the marabou stork's bald head has evolved to prevent coagulated blood and flesh sticking to it as it gorges on carcasses. Ruthless and conniving, the hyena often targets the young, weak and injured. While its evil laugh is enough to send most running, its bite is one of the strongest in the animal kingdom – powerful enough to crush bone. With dark-brown feathers and a taste for flesh, the carrion-eating vulture has long been seen as opportunistic and bloodthirsty.

The iconic double-tusked warthog is one of the Ugly Five's more desirable sightings, thanks in large part to *The Lion King*'s loveable Pumba – but generally they are considered cowardly and exceptionally unattractive, thanks to their coarse hair, lumpy faces and exaggerated under-eye bags. Finally, wildebeests might be the stars of the Great Migration, but the rest of the time they're seen as wildly ungainly, and a little dim-witted.



Hordes of wildebeest cross the crocodile-infested Mara River during the Great Migration from Tanzania's Serengeti

Skirting the western edges of the Masai Mara National Reserve, the Mara Triangle is home to large numbers of lions

Since 2014, the number of elephants in the Masai Mara has risen dramatically

Home to around 100 lions, and whole herds of elephant, giraffe and zebra, it's a place where visitors can come face to face with some of the world's most remarkable beasts.

Meaning 'coming together' in the Maasai's local Maa language, Naboisho is a symbol of nature in balance. Conservationists, socio-ecologists and Maasai leaders work together to preserve both its wildlife and cultural heritage, while also improving the lives of local communities. To keep visitor numbers low, only a handful of exclusive camps operate here, including Porini Mara Camp. Housing just six tents, not only is it surrounded by an abundance of resident game, but it also sits close to the Northern Migration corridor between the Masai Mara National Reserve and the Loita Plains to the east. In Porini camps, 282 hectares (700 acres) are allocated per tent, to guarantee seclusion and uninterrupted views.

For lion-lovers, the private Olare Motorogi Conservancy calls. Known for its unrivalled big-cat sightings, it's considered the best place to see lions in Africa. Within the conservancy, the aptly named Porini Lion Camp enjoys an enviably idyllic locale, just across from the Ntiakatiak River, which means visitors can watch boisterous hippos play and splash as they dine.

Surrounded by 15,000 glorious acres of conservation land, the tented Mara Bushtops camp is just a 20-minute drive from the Masai Mara National Reserve. Featuring spacious decked tents, a spa, a 24-hour butler service and a swimming pool, it boasts panoramic views across gently undulating plains and its very own salt lick, where animals gather to lick essential nutrients and minerals from deposits in the ground. Here, you can enjoy bird's-eye views via helicopter tours.

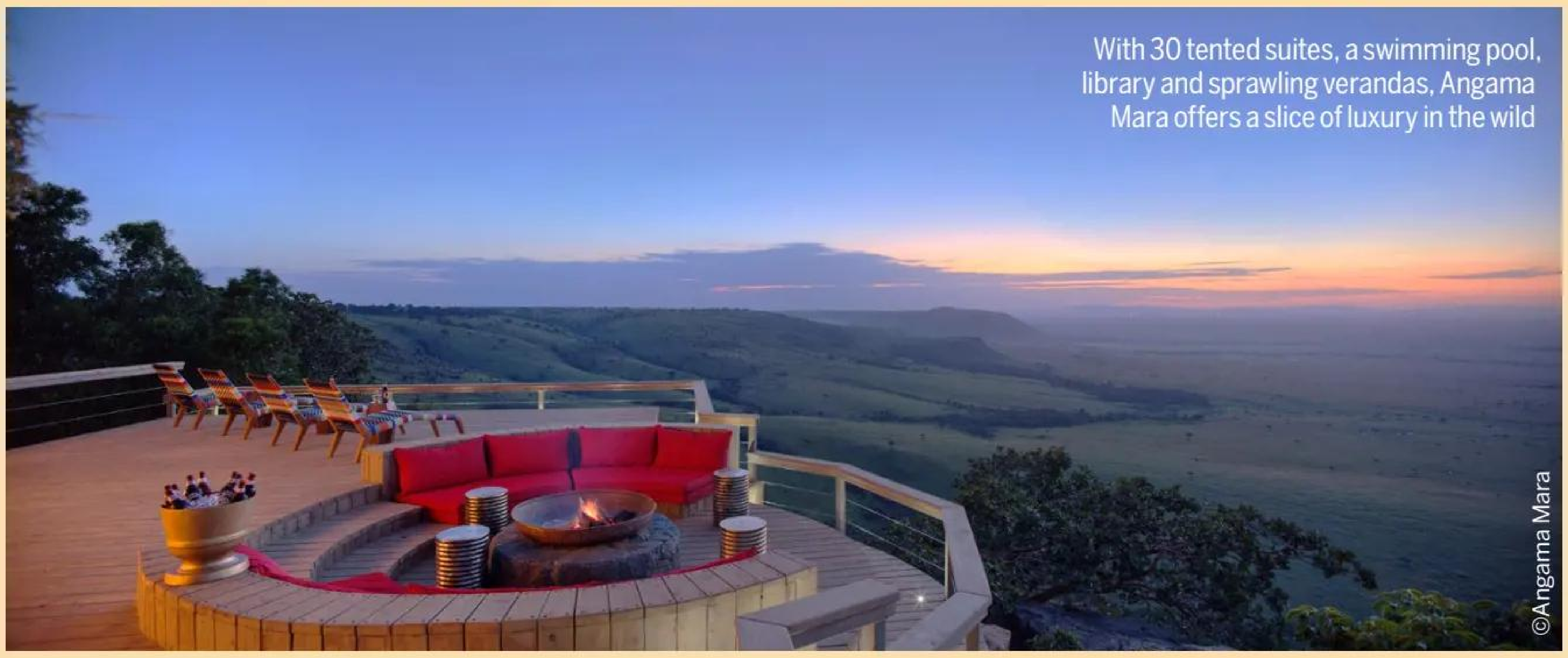
Of course, no trip to the Masai Mara is complete without an intoxicating cultural excursion to a local Maasai village. Here, manyattas – huts made of grass, mud and cow dung – are clustered together, protected by a traditional thorn-bush fence. It's a place where pastoral pride is still in play and time-honoured traditions reign. The red-robed Maasai, with tightly braided ochre-dyed hair, begin the ipid – a centuries-old dance, which sees the village warriors leap into the air with effortless ease – each attempting to jump higher and remain straighter than the others.

For those in search of a more immersive experience, homestays offer a chance to live and work alongside the Maasai. Gaining a genuine insight into their culture and traditions, visitors tend to cattle, repair huts and fetch water, before feasting on traditional plates of ugali, cornmeal porridge drowned in meat and vegetable stew. Once dusk falls, the lowing of cattle and warm crackling fire are adequate comforts, as are the countless glimmering stars, which sequin the black night sky.

Elsewhere in the park, before dawn, patterned balloons begin to expand above blasts of fiery propane gas. Slowly and silently, they climb 244 metres (800 feet) above the tundra, joined by the blazing orange sun, which turns the vast African sky red, then pink, then gold.

To the south, the purple hills of Tanzania edge just over the horizon. Floating quietly overhead, wildebeests, buffaloes, lions and rhinos can be stalked undisturbed. As leopards are spotted lying in the shade of the thorned acacia trees, the balloon descends slightly. Gliding towards the ground, Thomson's gazelles dance beneath, and hyenas race up a riverbank, having spotted a breakfast opportunity too good to pass up.

For the technology-tired or those who crave a back-to-basics approach, equine safaris beckon. Horseback tours vary from one to eight days. Longer trips are usually supported by mobile, tented convoys, which drive ahead to set up camp and prepare dinner. These often explore the sprawling Oloololo Escarpment, Olare Orok Valley and Ol Kinyei Conservancy, cutting through beautiful savannah, past elephants, lions and buffaloes, before galloping alongside herds of zebras and wildebeests. Since longer adventures often zig-zag through areas with big game, they are only suitable for experienced riders, comfortable in the saddle.



With 30 tented suites, a swimming pool, library and sprawling verandas, Angama Mara offers a slice of luxury in the wild

©Angama Mara

WHERE TO STAY

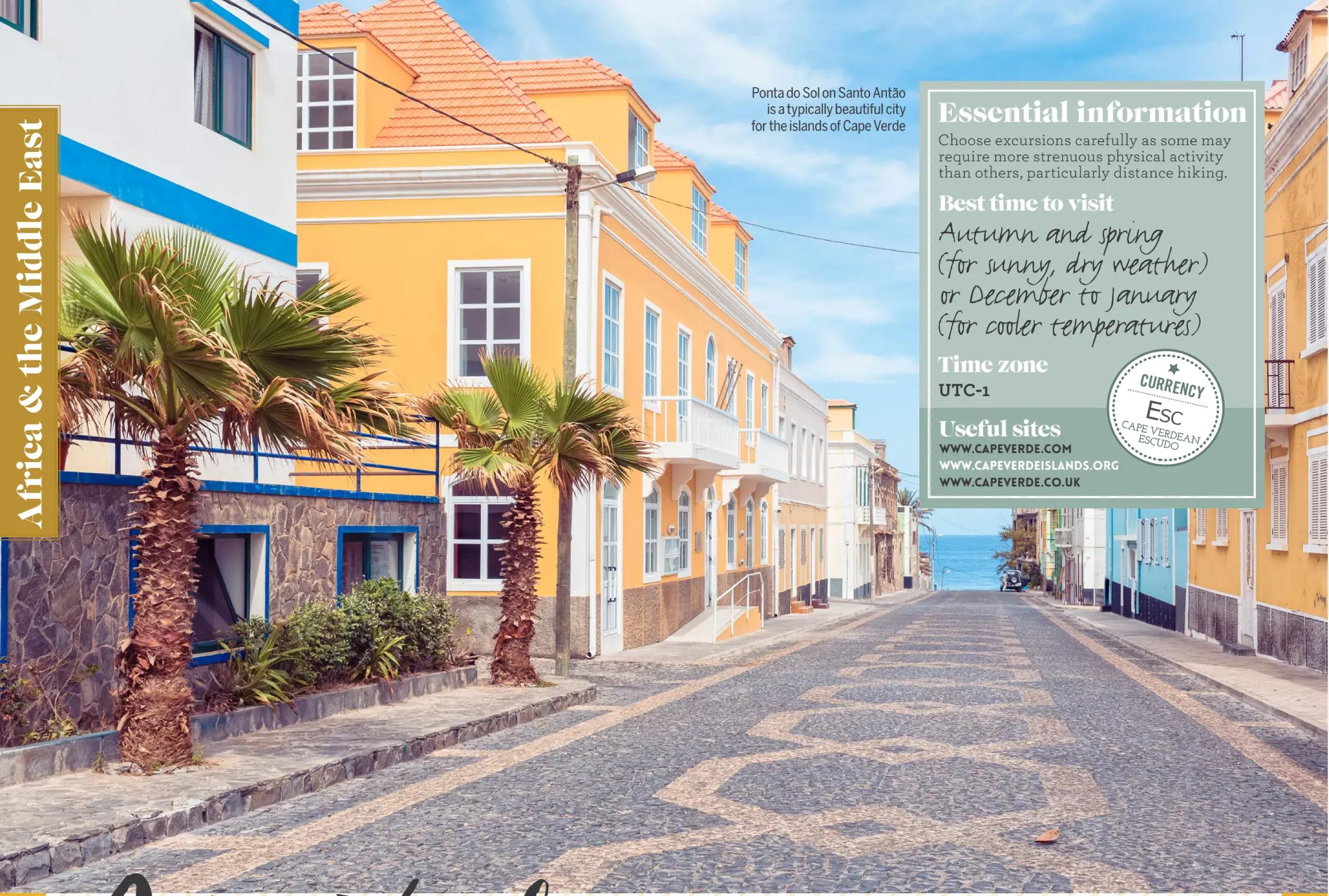
A wide variety of accommodation is available across the Masai Mara – from basic tents to luxury suites.

The first permanent tented camp in the park, and perhaps its most famous, Governors' Camp occupies prime position on the Mara River, awash with hippos and crocodiles.

A high-end option, Angama Mara, meaning 'suspended in mid-air', fittingly floats above the floor of Africa's Great Rift Valley. With two small camps of 30 tented suites, a private airfield and the animal-rich Mara Triangle just a ten-minute drive away, it's a luxurious take on the safari experience.

Entim Camp enjoys its own private stretch of the Mara River, close to where it meets the Talek River. Popular wildebeest crossing points can be seen from the eco-friendly camp, making it a popular choice during the Great Migration.

Meanwhile, hidden within the Mara North Conservancy, the traditional Elephant Pepper Camp, once a bush camp, offers rustic simplicity, with a dream location and amazing Maasai guides.



Ponta do Sol on Santo Antão is a typically beautiful city for the islands of Cape Verde

Essential information

Choose excursions carefully as some may require more strenuous physical activity than others, particularly distance hiking.

Best time to visit

Autumn and spring (for sunny, dry weather) or December to January (for cooler temperatures)

Time zone

UTC-1

CURRENCY
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CAPE VERDEAN ESCUDO

Useful sites

WWW.CAPEVERDE.COM
WWW.CAPEVERDEISLANDS.ORG
WWW.CAPEVERDE.CO.UK

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Cape Verde

Brilliant sunshine and cultural diversity await on this archipelago off the coast of Africa

Perhaps best described as the African Caribbean, the Cape Verde islands, a cluster of ten specks of land about 500 kilometres (311 miles) from the Senegalese coast of West Africa, bring leisure, romance and carefree days to life. And for those seeking adventure, Cape Verde does not disappoint.

While tourism is a relatively recent development in the islands, they have not remained 'undiscovered'. Thousands of travellers are experiencing the charms of Cape Verde and its varied offerings. Pristine, sandy beaches blend with stunning, panoramic views of volcanic formations, azure seas and sunny skies. Formed millions of years ago by tremendous volcanic activity, the islands reveal their heritage in landscapes not unlike the surface of the moon. Their people bring customs and traditions to life with a zest and colour that are reminiscent of the Caribbean isles of Jamaica or the Dominican Republic.

The largest of the islands, Sal, encompasses 220 square kilometres (85 square miles). Dotted with quaint settlements and the shopping mecca of Santa Maria on its southern shore, Sal is the most popular destination for those seeking a blend of culture, sun and breathtaking vistas. Stroll along the streets and duck into a shop selling local crafts and wares, dine in an outdoor café, and experience the spice and verve of local cuisine. Then head to the beaches along the inviting shoreline. A ribbon of soft sand stretches eight kilometres (five miles), and lively surf beckons sun worshippers.

The island of Boa Vista is the choice for many, as 55 kilometres (34 miles) of soft, white sand extend beyond the horizon and nestle against the deep blue of the Atlantic Ocean. Possibly the most captivating beach in all the islands is Boa Vista's Praia de Chaves, five kilometres (three miles) of unspoiled, pristine natural beauty. The nearby towns of Rabil and Sal Rei provide refreshments and transportation options.

Venturing out from the cities and resorts to explore the ancient volcanic origins of the Cape Verde islands is an unforgettable experience. The small islands of Santo Antão and Fogo, literally translated from the Portuguese as 'fire', bear testimony to the birth of the islands millions of years ago. These locales are truly off the beaten path but worth the effort, and excursions are available. The active volcano of Pico do Fogo rises 2,829 metres (9,281 feet) above Fogo, and the village Chã das Caldeiras prospers – incredibly – within the volcano crater.

Given its position along oceangoing trade routes with favourable winds and currents, Cape Verde is a hotspot for those who enjoy sailing and other water-related activities. Excursions aboard schooners to varied attractions are popular among visitors. Caribbean-style culture is pervasive with colourful buildings, eclectic music and tempting cuisine.

Four international airports serve Cape Verde, the newest opening on Boa Vista in 2007. Hotels and resorts offer moderately priced or upscale accommodations in Santa Maria and Boa Vista. Consider a package that includes on-going transportation.

The islands' capital city, Praia, and the city of Mindelo are primary ports of entry, and visitors glimpse the influence of Cape Verde's Portuguese settlers with their legacy of buildings that once housed government officials. Throughout the Cape Verde islands, activities abound. Soak up the sunshine, lose yourself along the beaches, and discover treasures in the quaint shops that welcome visitors year-round.

River Nile

History and beauty flow through the world's longest river in Egypt

The Nile is over 6,400 kilometres (4,000 miles) of stunning, shimmering, life-giving water. More than 300 million people rely on it for water, and so the river is lined with many of the most spectacular and important buildings and sights that Africa has to offer.

The Nile stretches all the way from Central Africa to Egypt in the north, making it the longest in the world. Although it passes through nine countries on its winding, meandering journey, it is most intrinsically linked with Egypt and the Pharaohs. Egypt's capital city, Cairo, was built on the banks of the Nile, the mighty river proving the perfect source of water and travel. There is so much to do in Cairo you could easily spend a week there, but highlights include the striking Muhammad Ali Mosque, the Khan el-Khalili souk and the Citadel, rising high over the city and, on a clear day, providing incredible views of one of Egypt's most famous landmarks. The Giza pyramid complex is just a short journey from the Nile – where you can enjoy the sights of these iconic and breathtaking structures, as well as the Great Sphinx. The Nile played a crucial part in the construction of the pyramids, its waters carrying the huge blocks of stone from upriver to the site in Giza. The pyramids are easily accessible from the Nile, and there are huge numbers of vehicles willing to take you there.

650 kilometres (400 miles) south of Giza is Luxor, an essential part of any Nile journey. There you can visit the Valley of the Kings, the site of Tutankhamun's tomb. Also in Luxor is the incredible Abu Simbel temples – awe-inspiring monuments dedicated to Ramesses II that were carved into the rock. The temples themselves are amazing enough to be worth the visit alone, but even more amazing is the fact that in the 1960s, they were carved up and moved 200 metres (656 feet) inland to protect them from the Nile.

They had to be moved due to the building of the Aswan Dam further downriver. You can visit this huge construction to appreciate the size and scale of the project, but it's not the most visually appealing megastructure.

Although the Nile is most closely linked with Egypt, there are magnificent sights to see beyond the Land of the Pharaohs. The Nile spends the first half of its life split into two: the White Nile and the Blue Nile. Khartoum in Sudan is well worth a visit to see where the two join together, while in Uganda the Murchison Falls National Park is the site of a huge 43-metre (141-foot) high waterfall. Also on your list should be Lake Victoria, one of the sources of the Nile.

There are dozens of tour operators willing to take you on a trip down the river. Huge cruise ships sail up and down the Nile, while for a more intimate and personal experience, smaller boats and barges can be hired.

The Nile is certainly one of the world's must-see and once-in-a-lifetime destinations. The river itself is an absolute force of nature, while its banks play host to some of the globe's most legendary buildings, monuments and super-structures that simply cannot be missed.

Traverse the Nile by boat to see all it has to offer

Essential information

Many of the towns and cities along the Nile require an expert tour guide to navigate.

Best time to visit

October to April

Time zone

UTC+2

CURRENCY

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EGYPTIAN POUND

Useful sites

WWW.EGYPTTOURSPLUS.COM/NILE-RIVER-TOURIST-ATTRACTIONS

WWW.EGYPT.TRAVEL/EN/REGIONS/NILE-VALLEY

WWW.DISCOVEREGYPT.CO.UK/NILE-CRUISES

Tel Aviv

Israel's Tel Aviv is a hipster's paradise of sun, sea, sand, skyscrapers and little sleep

DO NOT TRAVEL
See p.4 for more information

If you want a break from the modern, then visiting Jaffa is a must

Essential information

Tel Aviv is largely flat, so consider hiring a city bicycle from one of the 150 rental stations.

Best time to visit

March to April and September to November

Time zone

UTC+2

CURRENCY
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ISRAELI NEW SHEKEL

Useful sites

WWW.VISIT-TEL-AVIV.COM/EN
HTTPS://ISRAEL.TRAVEL/GOISRAEL
WWW.BAUHAUS-CENTER.COM/TEL-AVIV-WHITE-CITY-TOURS

If Jerusalem is Israel's history, then Tel Aviv is arguably its future – a modern, vibrant city on the coast of the Mediterranean that oozes with charm and a great feeling of cool. While it may be less populous by half, Tel Aviv is the country's economic and technological powerhouse. As such, its residents are young and energetic, filling the dance floors of the city's numerous pulsating nightclubs or supping cocktails in hidden speakeasy bars. There's a sense that Tel Avivians work hard during the day and party hard the rest of the time, and the 24/7 culture enables it to happen.

Tel Aviv actually means 'Ancient Hill of Spring' in Hebrew and that is, in many ways, rather apt since the city is ever-changing. Indeed, the skyline is punctuated by skyscrapers; modern edifices that point towards ongoing success. Not that the city's buildings are not without architectural merit. Visit the White City part of town and there are 4,000 buildings in the Bauhaus style – that is, those developed in the 1920s and 1930s that relate to modernism. It's the largest concentration of such buildings in the world, prompting UNESCO to proclaim it a World Cultural Heritage site in 2003. You can even take a tour around them, too.

It's certainly interesting to note how quickly Tel Aviv has established itself. Just 110 years old, having been formed on the outskirts of Jaffa as a housing estate, it has grown considerably thanks to an influx of Jewish refugees over the decades. Today, it's definitely worth paying a visit to Jaffa, if only to see the contrast. Home to a mix of Jewish and Arab residents, the ancient port city has narrow streets punctuated by courtyards, and it has become a popular destination thanks to attempts to restore Jaffa over the past decade, breathing fresh life into the area. Here you'll find independent cafes and restaurants, a bustling flea market and cultural boutiques selling small items and paintings.

Similar changes have taken place in Florentin, an area that has also attracted great numbers of young people. It comes alive at night as small bars pulsate with large crowds, but there is also an industrial vibe, particularly during the day. Likewise, Neve Tzedek is again young and fashionable and, like Florentin, it's a former poverty-stricken area that has benefitted from great investment, turning it into an artsy hub. You'll find restaurants serving up a very wide breadth of food here, as well as an eclectic range of architectural styles, the most striking of which are Oriental.

Of course, being by the sea also means visitors can relax in Tel Aviv should the partying become too much. The promenade fronts on to 13 sandy beaches, and it benefits from warm waters and wonderful weather. Some parts are busier and more hectic than others so you can pick and choose your vibe. The more adventurous might want to try watersports, while others may prefer to simply lie back and relax. After all, you'll want to conserve your energy to enjoy the rest of what Tel Aviv has to offer.

From diving to boat tours, there is plenty to do in beautiful Cap Malheureux

Essential information

Avoid visiting from January to March as this is cyclone season.

Best time to visit

May to December

Time zone

UTC+4

CURRENCY
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MAURITIAN RUPEE

Useful sites

TRAVEL.PADI.COM/D/MAURITIUS
WWW.AVENTUREDUSUCRE.COM
MAURITIUSATTRACTIONS.COM

Mauritius

Known as the Pearl of the Indian Ocean, this small island paradise does more than live up to its name

Think Mauritius is just pristine white beaches, crystal-clear sea and palm trees? Think again. The heavenly island in the Indian Ocean is much more than just sparkling turquoise water and unspoilt sands. Whether you want to enjoy nature or culture, adventure or relaxation, this tropical paradise has something for everyone.

Mauritius has the perfect climate for a sunny holiday, with temperatures of 17 to 30 degrees Celsius (63 to 86 degrees Fahrenheit) year-round, and more than 100 beaches.

For the active traveller, there's plenty to keep you busy, from paddleboarding to kitesurfing. Mauritius is also world-renowned for big game fishing. Back on dry land, Domaine d'Etoile is ideal for adventurers, offering quad biking, horse riding and ziplining. And for sport fans, the Gymkhana Golf Club is believed to be the world's fourth-oldest golf course.

Mauritius is a nature lover's dream, from its mountains and forests to waterfalls and coral reefs. The spectacular Le Morne Brabant is a 556-metre (1,820-foot) high mountain and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which, when viewed from above, gives the illusion of an 'underwater waterfall'. The Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam Botanical Gardens, famous for its giant water lilies, is one of the best botanical gardens in the world. Hikers should head to the Black River Gorges National Park for lush jungle, or Tamarind Falls for captivating cascades. Chamarel and Rochester Falls are also worth a visit if you get the chance. Another natural wonder is the Terres des Sept Couleurs, stunning sand dunes made up of seven different colours.

Mauritius is not only a natural paradise, but a haven for wildlife too. The island is surrounded by coral reefs and marine life. There are around 50 dive sites (Rempart Serpent and La Cathédrale are two of the best) and around 4,000 fish species. If you're not a qualified diver, you can go snorkelling or board a glass-bottomed boat. Above water you can go dolphin or whale watching at Tamarin Bay or visit Ile Aux Aigrettes to see giant tortoises and pink pigeons.

For such a small island, Mauritius is surprisingly multicultural, with a mix of Indian, African, French and Chinese, which can be seen in its music, traditions and food. Dance the traditional sega or visit one of the country's many festivals to take in the culture. The Maha Shivaratri Festival, during which Hindus bathe in the Grand Bassin lake to bring good fortune, is the biggest pilgrimage outside of India. The country's culture can also be seen in its architecture. Visit the vibrant city of Port Louis to discover French colonial style, or take a tour of Eureka House, an authentic 1830s creole estate. Also worth a visit is the Champ de Mars racecourse where Mauritian independence was proclaimed, and Cap Malheureux where the British defeated the French in 1810.

Mauritius's history is deeply rooted in the sugar-cane industry. Visit L'Aventure de Sucre or stop off at Chamarel Rhumerie for a tour of how rum – a byproduct of sugar – is made.

Mauritian cuisine is a combination of cultures and flavours. From seafood and Indian curries to French pastries, foodies will love experimenting. Don't forget to try the delicious dholl puri, a flatbread stuffed with split peas and Mauritius's national dish.

The list of things to do in Mauritius is endless. If you enjoy shopping, Grand Baie Fish Market and Port Louis Market should be on your itinerary. It's the perfect destination for honeymooners with a whole host of luxury resorts, including the unforgettable Bubble Lodge at Bois Cheri. The country may be known for its five-star accommodation and casinos but you can plan a budget holiday here, too.

The world really is your oyster, so get booking to go and see this dazzling pearl.

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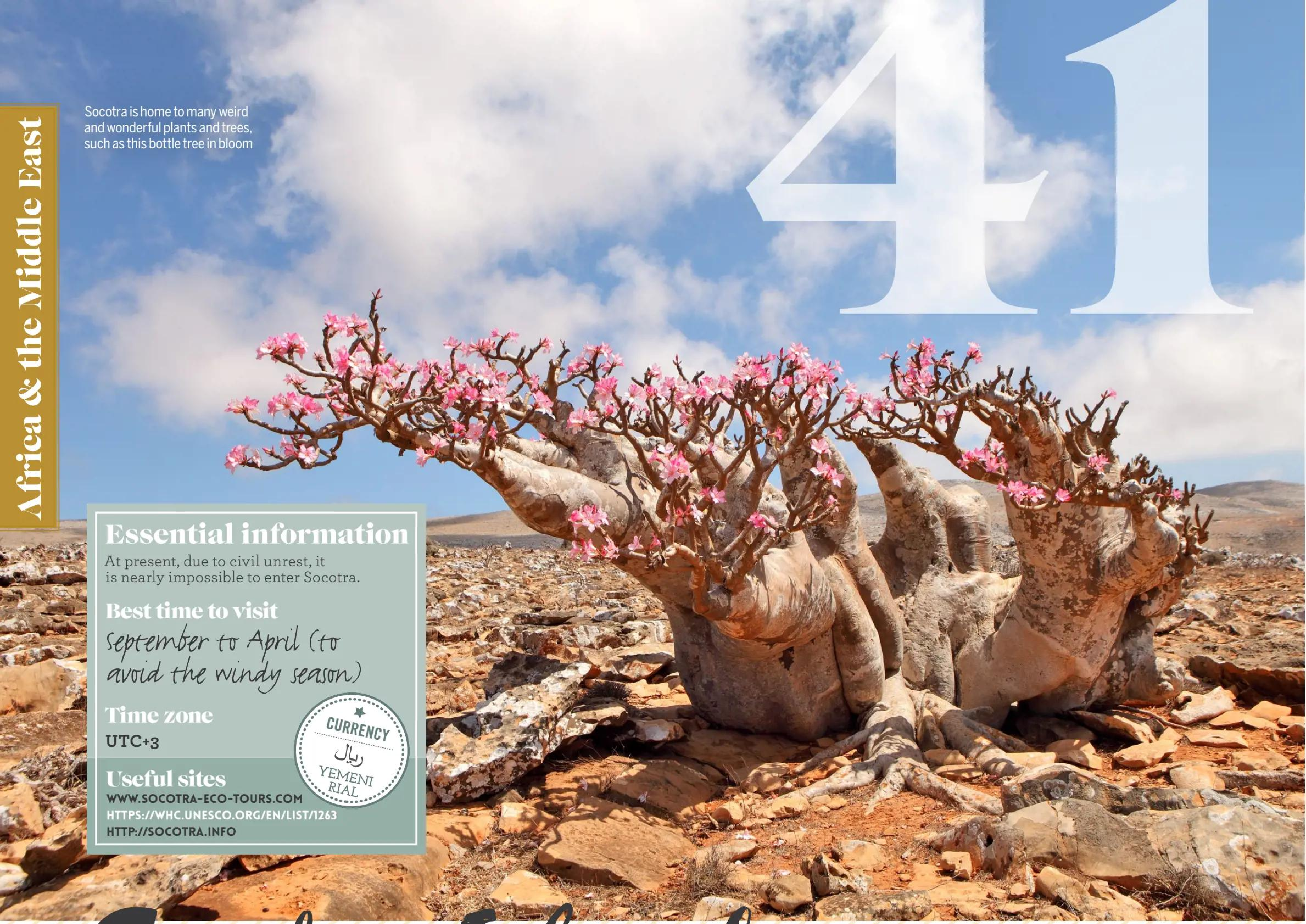

Socotra is home to many weird and wonderful plants and trees, such as this bottle tree in bloom

Essential information

At present, due to civil unrest, it is nearly impossible to enter Socotra.

Best time to visit

September to April (to avoid the windy season)

Time zone

UTC+3

Currency

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Yemeni Rial

Useful sites

www.socotra-eco-tours.com
https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1263
http://socotra.info

Socotra Island

Yemen's stunningly bizarre Socotra Island is among the most unusual landscapes on Earth

Like stepping onto an alien planet, Yemen's Socotra Island is as bewildering as they come, luring some of history's diehard adventurers to its shores – Alexander the Great, Marco Polo and Sinbad, to name a few. Socotra is so geographically isolated – 400 kilometres (250 miles) off the coast of Yemen in the Arabian Sea – one third of its plant life and 90 per cent of its reptiles are found nowhere else on the planet.

Of its endemic species, the dragon blood tree is the most legendary. Some locals believe the trees, known in Arabic as 'dam al-akhawain' or 'the blood of the two brothers', grew from the spot where siblings Darsa and Samha fought to their deaths. Others suggest it was created from the blood of a dragon that was wounded fighting an elephant.

Either way, its aesthetics are almost as strange as its mythological beginnings. Atop its thick, gnarled trunk, which bleeds crimson resin, sits a flying saucer-shaped knot of branches with a dense crown of prehistoric, skyward-pointing leaves. Having evolved and adapted to the arid climate, the umbrella-like canopy provides shade regardless of the Sun's position, reducing evaporation.

Beyond the ecological treasure trove of diverse flora and fauna, Socotra – a UNESCO World Heritage Site – is home to a mysterious mix of white sandy beaches, limestone caves, desert dunes and granite peaks. One of the most difficult-to-access inhabited islands, most adventures to Socotra begin in Hadibo – where the skyline is dominated by the Hajhir Mountains, thrusting 1,500 metres (5,000 feet) heavenwards, like jagged teeth. Snaking through the granite massif, hiking trails wind past cucumber plants and squat, bulbous bottle trees, through frankincense groves and across imposing canyons.

To the east, Hoq Cave, an underground limestone labyrinth, is replete with monolithic stalactites and stalagmites, as well as centuries-old rock art. Created between the 1st century BCE and the 6th century CE by seatraders from as far as India, Ethiopia and Greece, the wall drawings portray humans, animals and geometric patterns.

A boat-ride away, Shuab Bay is considered by many to be the most beautiful beach in the world. Each day, hundreds of spinner dolphins play in the cove, while alabaster ghost crabs navigate the shallows. The coastal paradise of Kalansia, with its powder-white sand and electrifyingly blue waters comes a close second.

Unlike most of Socotra, the Ayaft Gorge is a green oasis, thanks to its unique moisture-retaining microclimate. Thick vegetation, natural springs and freshwater streams thrive all year round. Ecological diversity continues at the rippling dunes of Stero and wind-swept sand piles of Archer, heaped ten storeys high against shoreline cliffs.

Meanwhile, the desert cape of Di Hamri is home to a natural coral reef and unique hybrid of marine life, making it a popular diving and snorkelling spot – expect parrotfish, moray eels, stingrays and sea turtles. However, home only to a handful of nomadic herdsmen, Diksom and its forest of dragon blood trees, which seemingly burst from the savannah-like plateau, remain Socotra's biggest draw.

The Pyramids of Giza

Gaze in wonder at Egypt's iconic 4,500-year-old pyramids

The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World were a group of remarkable manmade structures compiled by the Ancient Greek historian Herodotus that represented the most incredible feats of engineering and beauty in the civilised world. Of those seven, only the Great Pyramid of Giza still exists – so how can you turn down the opportunity to visit the last standing miracle that impressed even the Ancient Greeks?

Camel rides are widely available if you don't want to walk, but beware of scammers

Essential information

Touts will pressure you to buy trinkets and camel/horse rides for inflated fees, so be firm.

Best time to visit

February to April (to avoid crowds and the worst of the heat)

Time zone

UTC+2

CURRENCY

£

EGYPTIAN POUND

Useful sites

WWW.EGYPT.TRAVEL
WWW.MFA.GOV.EG/ENGLISH/INSIDEEGYPT/PAGES/TOURISM.ASPX
WWW.EGYPTTOURSPLUS.COM/GIZA-PYRAMIDS

Built around 2,500 BCE, there are six pyramids in the complex – with the biggest and most impressive built as a tomb for the Fourth Dynasty Pharaoh Khufu. This pyramid measured an incredible 147 metres (481 feet) tall when it was built, although unfortunately the top has been lost, but it's still a mightily impressive 137 metres (451 feet) tall.

The second-tallest pyramid is the final resting place of Khufu's son, Khafre; while the third was built for, you've guessed it, Khafre's son, Menkaure. Three much smaller pyramids belong to Khufu's queens. The sheer size and scale of these pyramids is utterly breathtaking, and you can't help but be amazed when you see them up close. Even these days, the pyramids would be a true feat of engineering, but the construction is even more impressive given that they were built more than 4,500 years ago.

The pyramids are situated ten kilometres (six miles) from the River Nile – the mighty icon of Egypt crucial to the manufacture of the half-dozen monoliths. The two-ton blocks of stone that make up the pyramids were cut from local quarries, but the pyramids were clad in gleaming white limestone from 15 kilometres (nine miles) further down the Nile. Unfortunately the limestone has since worn away, but the pyramids are nonetheless a stunning sight.

The pyramids are just 13 kilometres (eight miles) from Cairo, so it's an easy journey to reach them from the capital. You have several options, ranging in price and speed, from a subway and bus to a coach or taxi. The taxi is the most expensive option, but will get you there quickest – however, be sure to negotiate a price before you head off.

The pyramids can comfortably be seen within a day. You will need to pay for a ticket to enter the complex, which actually gets you into one of the smaller pyramids. For an extra fee, you can go inside the Great Pyramid itself, but the interior of one pyramid is much the same as another, so it's up to you whether you want to be able to tell people at home you stepped inside the Great Pyramid.

Also not to be missed is the Great Sphinx. This grand and mysterious stone carving was built to guard the tomb of Khafre, leading some to believe it was originally a depiction of Anubis, the god of death and embalming. It's still one of the world's biggest stone carvings, measuring 73 metres (243 feet) long by 20 metres (66 feet) high, and is a sight unlike any other.

While other worldly wonders lose their glamour and appeal as they age and decay, if anything the Pyramids simply grow in lustre and mystique. The engineering brilliance of the Ancient Egyptians is still incredibly impressive, and this step back in history is one you simply have to experience to appreciate.

Madagascar

Take a walk on the wild side in Madagascar, an island like no other

The Avenue of the Baobabs looks particularly impressive if you visit at sunset

Essential information

Keep your passport on you at all times in Madagascar – if you don't, you could be fined.

Best time to visit

April to November

Time zone

UTC+3

CURRENCY

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MALAGASY ARIARY

Useful sites

WWW.TRAVELMADAGASCAR.ORG
WWW.WILDMADAGASCAR.ORG
HTTPS://MADAGASCAR-TOURISME.COM/EN

Madagascar is paradise for nature lovers. This verdant and biodiverse island is home to some of the most fascinating animals on Earth, 90 per cent of which cannot be found in the wild anywhere else on Earth. As well as being a natural habitat for lemurs, chameleons and other exotic creatures, the African nation is an ideal place for adventurous travellers to explore.

Most journeys through Madagascar begin in the capital city of Antananarivo (or Tana, as it's colloquially known). This bustling hub is smack bang in the centre of the island, making it the obvious base to travel from on day trips to further-flung destinations.

Tana is also a fascinating city in its own right – historic buildings like the Manjakamiadana Rova and Presidential Palace give a rich sense of the city's economic and political past, as do cultural attractions such as the Musée Andafivaratra. For those who'd rather gain a more hands-on experience of the city's local culture, a shopping spree in Analakely Market or Gare de Soarano (a former train station-turned-shopping centre where local artists regularly display their work) is a popular activity.

If you do go shopping, be sure to pick up some classic Malagasy products. Silk is much cheaper here than you'll find it back home – you can watch it being made at the production facility in Ambalavao, and purchase it from shops across the island. Spices and essential oils are another speciality, and if you're partial to a tipple, you'll definitely want to try some local rum.

Exciting as the capital city can be, it's by no means Madagascar's biggest draw. Nature is the real prize here, and it can be found scattered liberally across the island's 587,000-square-kilometre (226,000-square-mile) landmass.

The best way to ensure that you experience Madagascar's many natural wonders is to hire a driver. Much of the terrain here can be tricky to navigate, so making the most of knowledgeable locals and their 4x4 vehicles will certainly be money well spent.

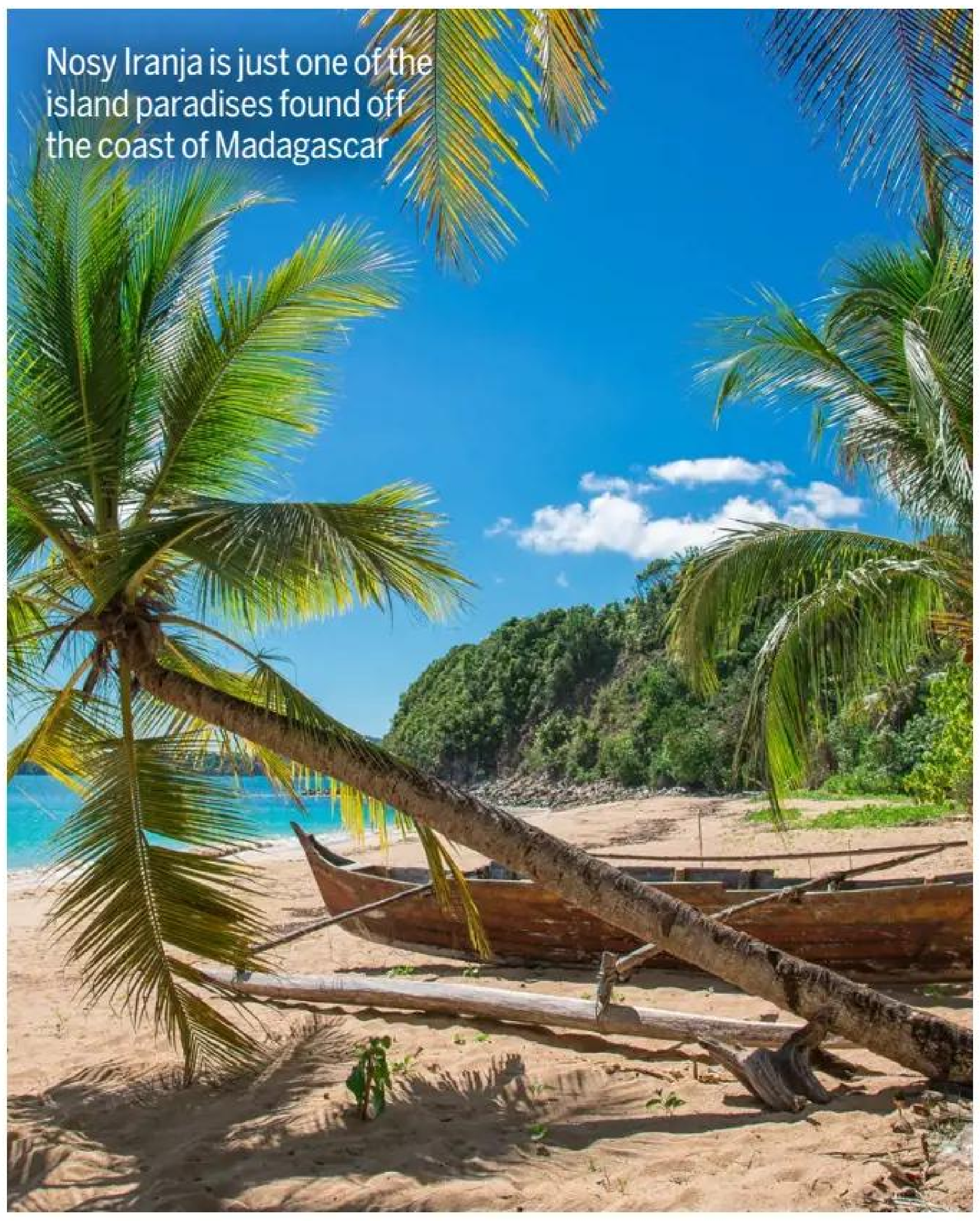
A cheaper option is to travel around via taxi brousse (bush taxi), minibuses that are packed with people and their possessions. Travelling like this can take longer and be uncomfortable, but unique encounters with locals and considerably cheaper fares can make up for it. Some daredevil drivers decide to take on Madagascar's notoriously bumpy roads by hiring a car – if you do, expect to travel slowly and feel your bones rattle wherever you go.

With 25 national parks to choose from, nature-loving visitors to Madagascar are spoiled for choice. These protected areas contain most of the island's remaining forests, making them the perfect places to spot lemurs and other awe-inspiring animals.

Take Andasibe-Mantadia National Park, for instance. Also known as Périnet Reserve, it's home to 11 lemur species, ranging from the charismatic indri (one of the world's largest lemurs and an icon of Malagasy folklore) to the spooky aye-aye (a rare, nocturnal creature that hunts for insects by tapping hollow trees with its spindly fingers). This is one of Madagascar's most accessible and popular national parks, located three hours east of Antananarivo.

Isalo National Park, with its desert canyon landscape and deep turquoise pools, is another appealing option. The naturally sculpted rock formations look particularly magical against the backdrop of Madagascar's otherworldly sunsets, and with 400 species of plants found in the park, Isalo is a botanist's dream.

For mountains, rainforests and one of the rarest animals on Earth, head to Marojejy National Park. This is home to the silky sifaka, a critically endangered lemur that hides in the tree-covered slopes of this enchanting part of the island. With its pristine white coat and amiable demeanour, the sifaka's epithet as 'angel of the forest' is an apt one. Other notable animal species that can be found here include the


Nosy Iranja is just one of the island paradises found off the coast of Madagascar

panther chameleon and one of Madagascar's most distinctive birds, the helmet vanga.

When visiting Madagascar's national parks, you'll need to pay an entrance fee. These vary in cost from £9.50 ($12) to £14 ($18). The cost of admission is well worth it, and goes towards protecting the creatures that depend on the delicate habitats within. Being accompanied by a local guide is compulsory when exploring the parks, and means you'll benefit from being shown the best trails and wildlife-spotting opportunities. You'll be able to hire one from the entrance in most cases, with costs starting from around £20 ($26) for a four-hour trek.

Being an island nation, Madagascar's 5,000 kilometres (3,100 miles) of coastline is waiting to be explored. Some of the best beaches can be found in Anakao, a laid-back fishing town with some great choices of food and accommodation. The small islands off Madagascar's coast are equally appealing, such as Île aux Nattes with its classic tropical vibes, and Nosy Iranja, a duo of islands that become one during low tide.

If you think Madagascar looks magical from above sea level, you're in for a different kind of beauty when you don a snorkel and head below the water's surface. The world's fifth largest coral reef can be found here, and it attracts some of the ocean's most enchanting creatures – turtles, sharks, rays and countless colourful fish can be spotted on a diving expedition.

The volcanic island of Nosy Be is the place to be if you are looking for variety. The shipwrecks and colourful reefs within its reach attract all kinds of marine creatures, from majestic manta rays to colossal whale sharks. Speaking of big animals, you might be lucky enough to spot a humpback whale during a boat trip, particularly if you visit between September and November.

Back on land, one of the most recognisable images in Madagascar can be found in the southern half of the island: the baobab is the national tree here, and you can't leave without snapping a photo of its humongous trunk. Tourists flock to Allée des Baobabs (or Avenue of the Baobabs) for postcard-perfect views of the trees lining a dirt road, exquisitely framed by the vivid African sky.

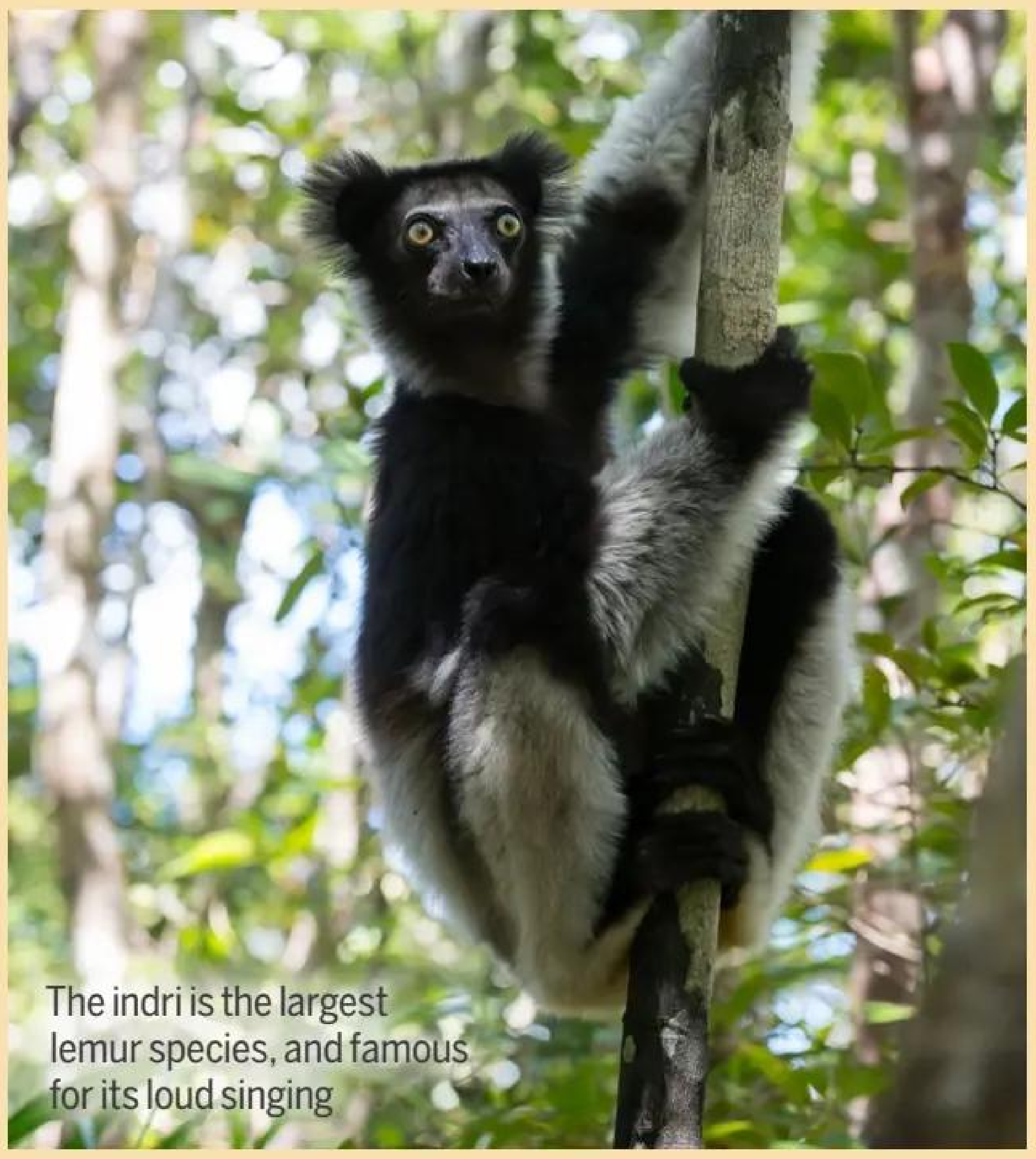
Humpback whales visit the warm waters surrounding Madagascar every autumn

ISLAND OF LEMURS

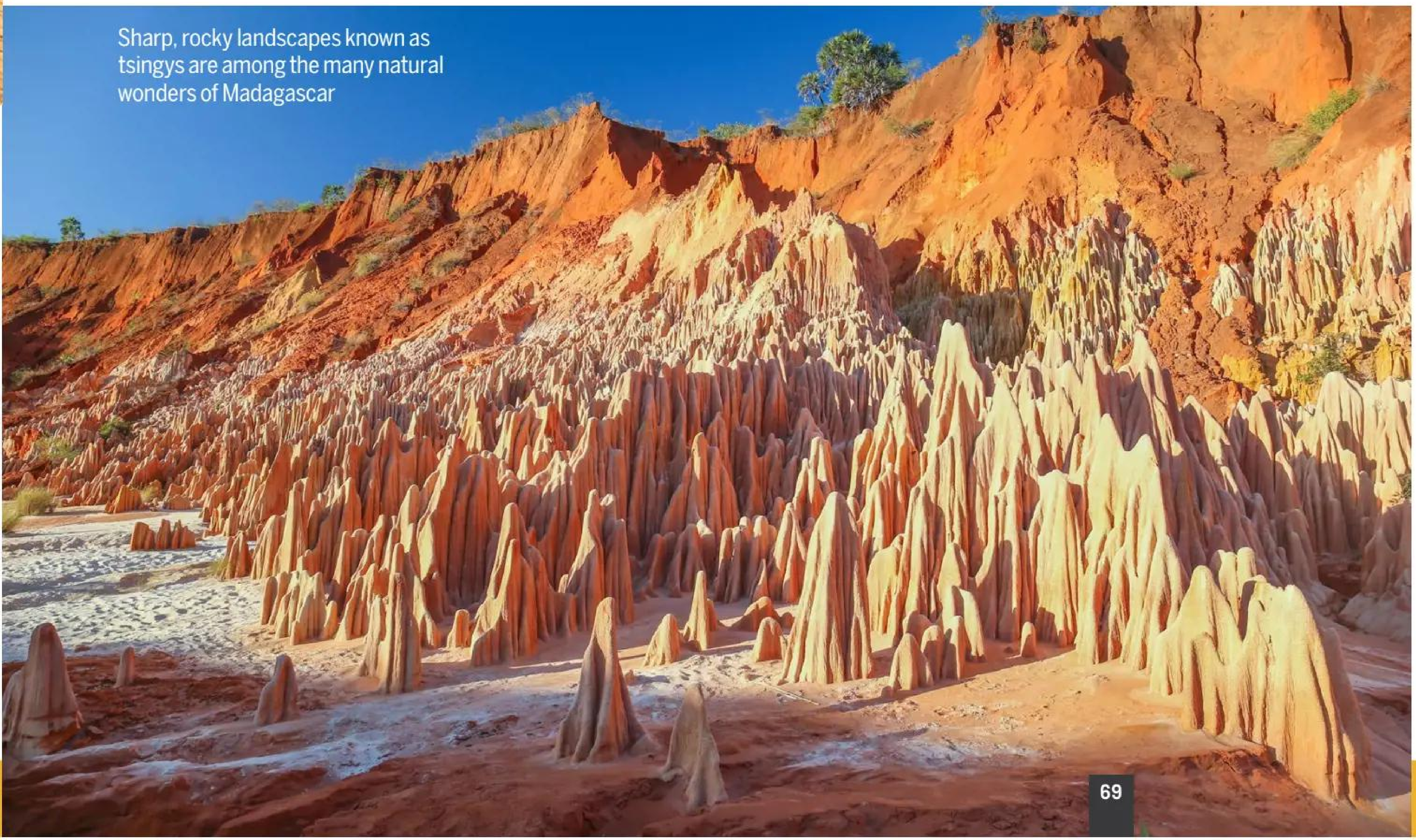
Seeing Madagascar's most famous residents in the wild makes a trip here truly special. There are at least 113 known species of lemur, and all of them are endemic to the island.

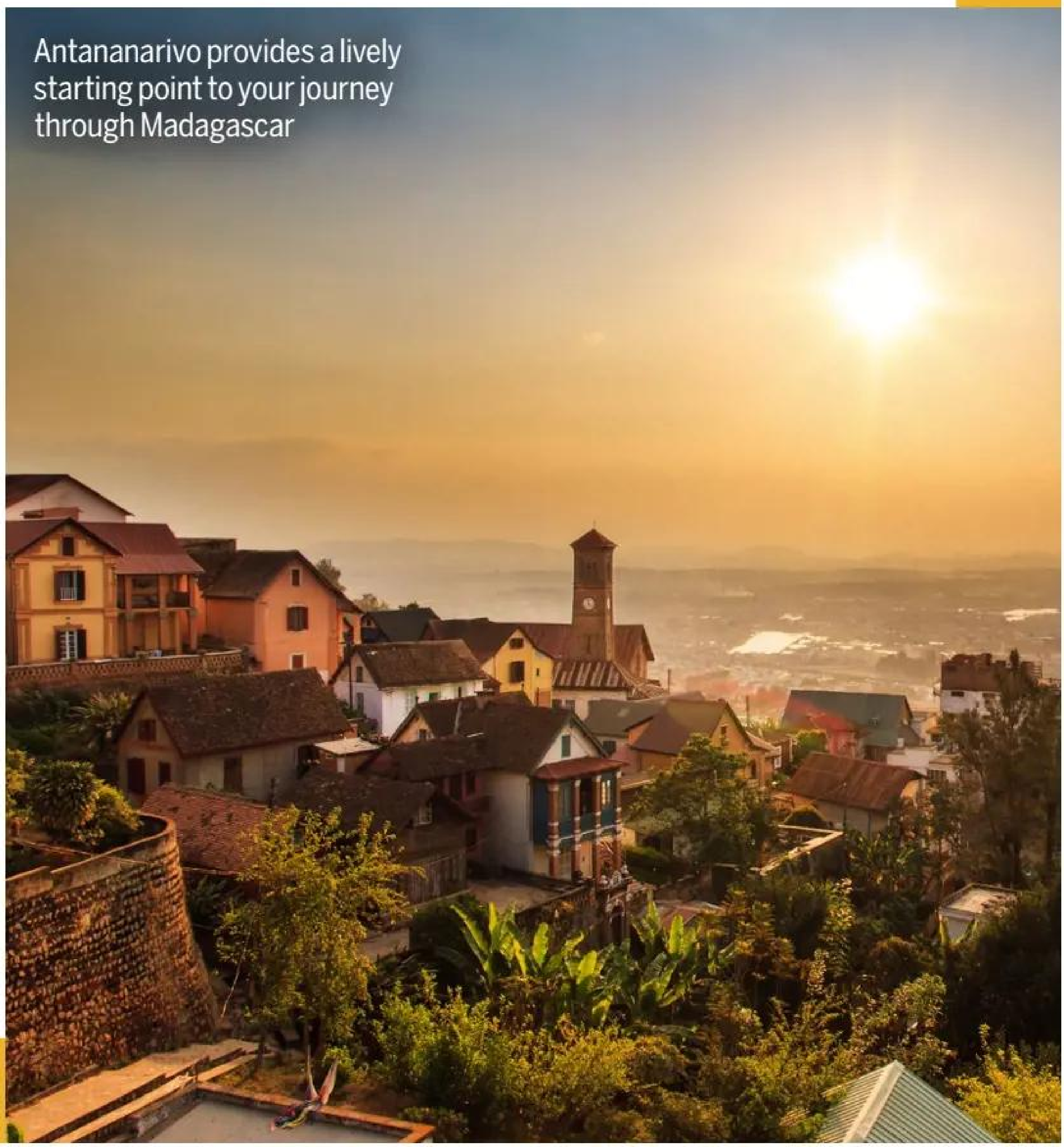
From the tiny mouse lemur to the imposing indri, these charming primates come in a variety of sizes and colours. Recognising different species in their natural habitat provides the kind of fun that money can't buy – nature is everywhere here, and it doesn't cost a thing.

For the best chance of seeing lemurs, visit one of Madagascar's many national parks and reserves. Berenty Reserve is a good choice; famous primatologist Alison Jolly studied lemurs here for 50 years. It's home to a community of around 500 ring-tailed lemurs, alongside equally cute Verreaux's sifakas. For indris, head to Andasibe, and if you want to catch a glimpse of the elusive aye-aye, pay a night-time visit to the appropriately named Aye-Aye Island.


The indri is the largest lemur species, and famous for its loud singing

THE ISLAND OF NOSY BE IS THE PLACE TO BE IF YOU ARE LOOKING FOR VARIETY


Sharp, rocky landscapes known as tsingys are among the many natural wonders of Madagascar


Antananarivo provides a lively starting point to your journey through Madagascar

44 *Lombok*
page 72
-
45 *Gili Islands*
page 73
-
46 *Mount Fuji*
page 74
-
47 *Goa*
page 75
-
48 *El Nido*
page 76
-
49 *Lake Issyk-Kul*
page 77
-
50 *Chiang Mai*
page 78
-
51 *Mandalay*
page 80
-
52 *Ubud*
page 81
-
53 *Phuket*
page 82
-
54 *Koh Samui*
page 83
-
55 *Koh Tao*
page 83
-
56 *Koh Lanta*
page 84
-
57 *Koh Phangnan*
page 85
-
58 *Koh Phi Phi*
page 85
-
59 *Maldives*
page 86
-
60 *Ha Long Bay*
page 87
-
61 *Hong Kong*
page 88
-
62 *Bentota*
page 89
-
63 *Tokyo*
page 90
-

ASIA

64 Kathmandu
page 92
-
65 Sarawak
page 93
-
66 River Ganges
page 94
-
67 Angkor temples
page 96
-
68 Kerala
page 97
-
69 Himalayas
page 98
-
70 Everest Base Camp
page 98
-
71 Annapurna Circuit
page 99
-

Lombok

The exotic charm of Indonesia thrives on Lombok, an island less visited than nearby Bali

Lesser known than its highly commercialised, world-famous sister island of Bali, Lombok in the West Nusa Tenggara province of Indonesia, enchants its visitors with all the beauty and colourful adventures of paradise. However, its slower pace and relaxing lifestyle are appealing to those who wish to wander, to reflect, and to rest away from the frenetic pace of everyday life.

Finding the diversions of a lifetime is an easy task on Lombok. In fact, spending time on Lombok blends the best of the vibrant Indonesian culture and activities with the opportunity to re-energise and rejuvenate the spirit amid the shining sun and sparkling sea.

Just north of Mataram, the capital city, which is served by several carriers flying into the island's international airport, the tourism hub of Senggigi is home to hotel accommodations, from budget-priced rooms to luxury suites, and arrangements may be made for excursions. The tourism area stretches 30 kilometres (19 miles) along the coastal road, and visitors may immediately avail themselves of ground transportation to the most popular destinations.

Lombok is striking for its lush, tropical forests that invite unique ecotourism experiences such as extended hikes or nature walks, while the second-tallest volcano in Indonesia, Mount Rinjani, towers 3,726 metres (12,224 feet) above the verdant jungle floor. Mount Rinjani National Park is home to varied species of flora and fauna, including mahogany, ficus, orchids, monkeys, deer, colourful birds, and more. A hike up the slope of Mount Rinjani is an unforgettable trek into the timeless beauty of the island. Choose the right walk and remember that the steep grade of some trails may be challenging, while others trace a gentler course for a more leisurely experience.

Elsewhere on Lombok, the powdery sands of Kuta Beach are the best known for sun worshippers, while the beach at Tanjung Aan in the south is an unspoiled jewel, perhaps the finest on all of Lombok, both because of its wondrous beauty beside the turquoise waters of the Indian Ocean and because it is slightly off the beaten path. Taking the time to explore may just uncover another hidden gem, a wisp of sensual sand tucked away and waiting for a few hours of enjoyment.

In February or March of each year, visitors flock to Lombok to experience the Bau Nyale Festival. The excitement revolves around the nyale, a worm-like fish, and the festival celebrates the first sighting of the season along with the consumption of the nyale, roasted and served in banana leaves, during the colourful fishing festival. The revelry also commemorates a melancholy chapter in island lore, recalling a mythical princess who chose to drown in the waters rather than submit to a politically arranged marriage.

Visitors should be aware that public transportation on Lombok is not dependable, and hiring a car to conduct their own island tour or enlisting the assistance of a local guide are preferred options for seeing the sights of the island, even if they are more expensive. Those who are more adventurous might consider renting a motorcycle, strapping on a helmet, and taking their own road. The relatively small size of

Lake Segara Anak lies at the summit of Mount Rinjani, a volcano that dominates the landscape on the island of Lombok

A stunning view of the Senaru Waterfalls greets visitors willing to take a short hike from the nearby village on Lombok

Essential information

No motorised transport is allowed in the Gili Islands, but electric scooters are available.

Best time to visit

Peak season occurs from April to september

Time zone

UTC+8

CURRENCY

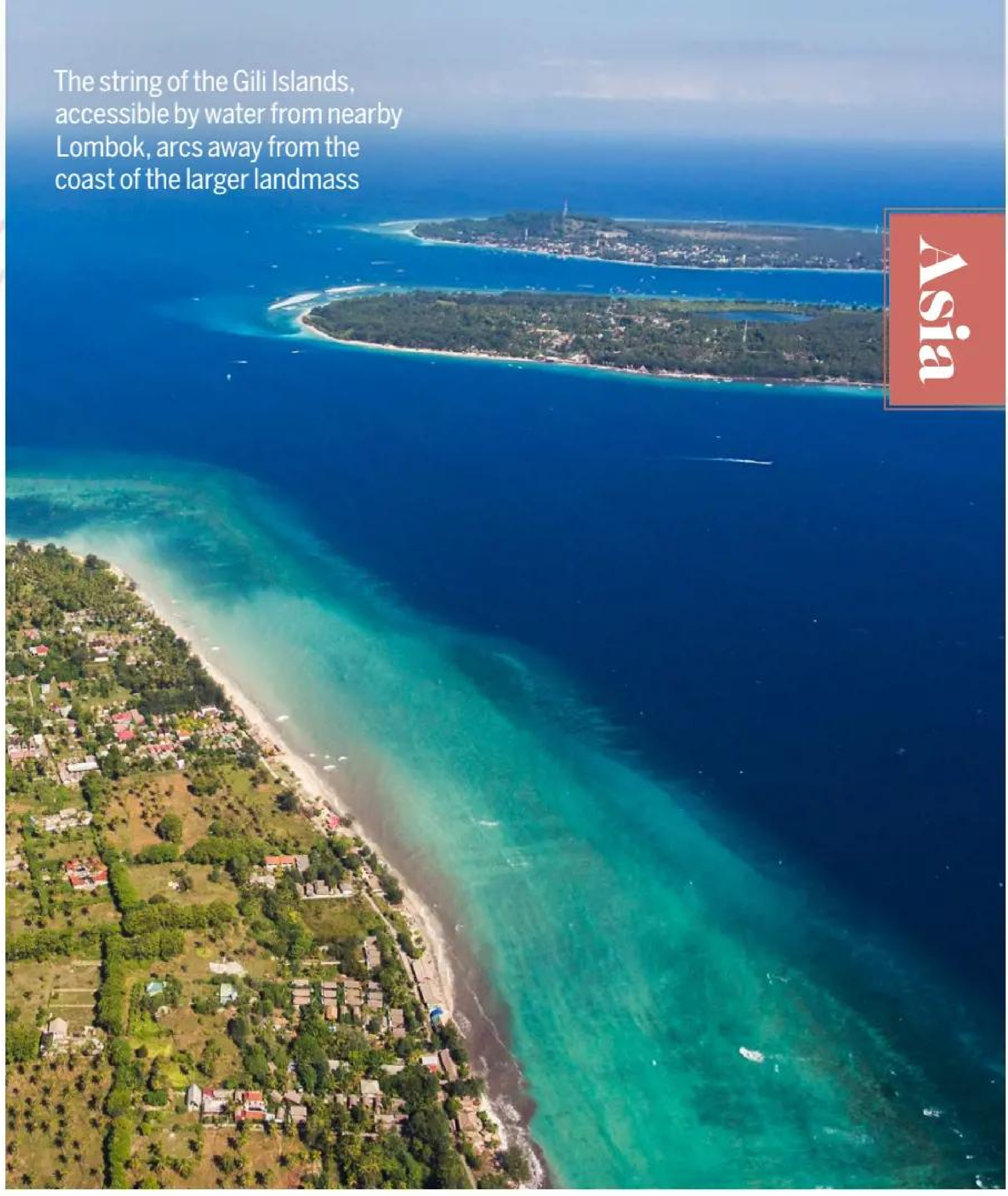
Rp

INDONESIAN RUPIAH

Useful sites

GILI-PARADISE.COM
WWW.GILIBOOKINGS.COM
ADVENTURE-LOMBOK.COM/TOURS-AND-ACTIVITIES

A traditional brightly coloured horse-drawn cidomo on Gili Trawangan beach front



The string of the Gili Islands, accessible by water from nearby Lombok, arcs away from the coast of the larger landmass

Lombok enables the island to be explored in a single day if time is of the essence. A motorcycle excursion extends virtually complete freedom, and removes the issues surrounding price haggling with multiple drivers or waiting for a guide to begin the journey. A stretch along the coastal road from Senggigi to Pemenang is ideal for motorcycles, while side roads lead to rice paddies and beautiful waterfalls.

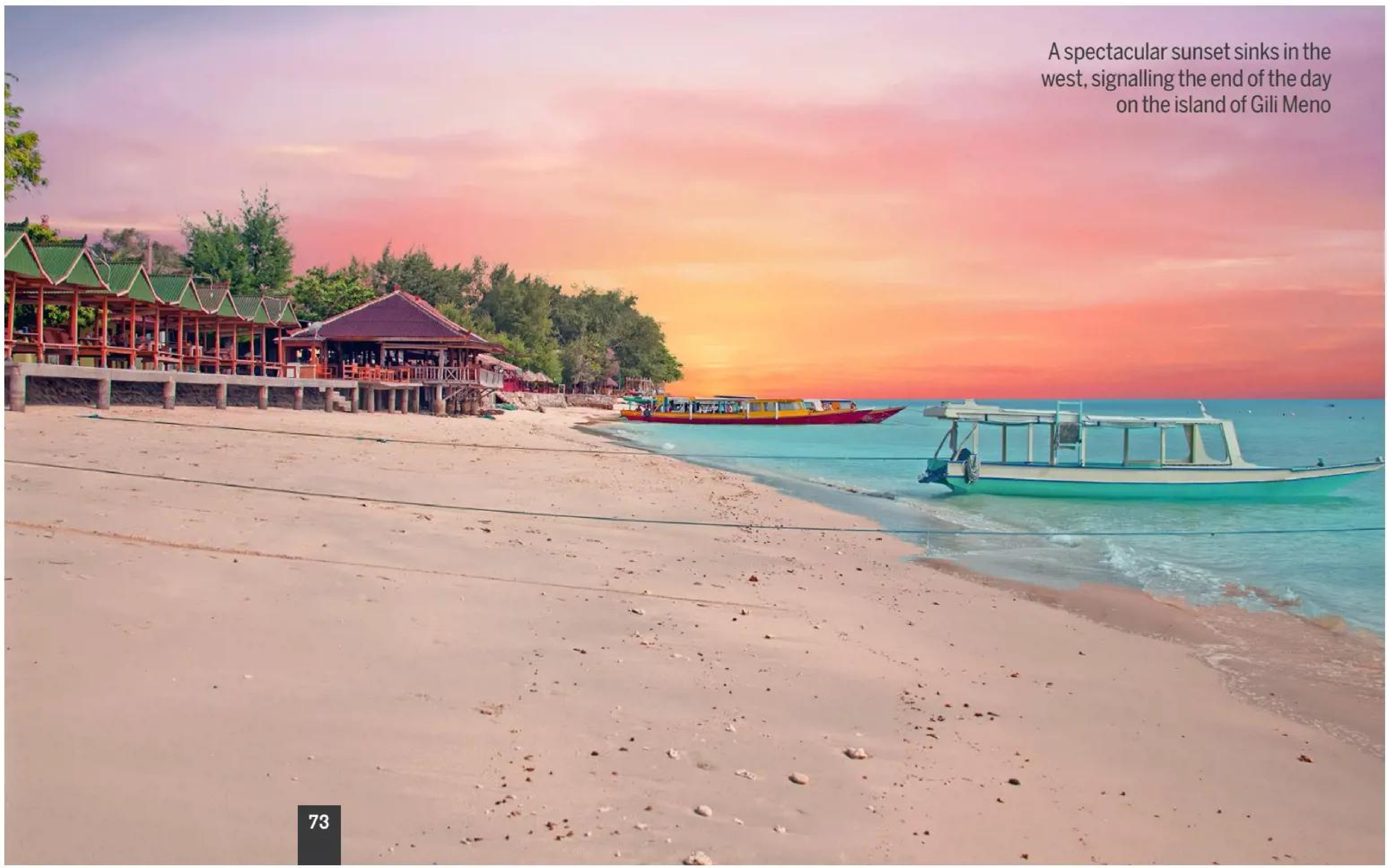
Visiting the people of Senaru Village is entertaining, and sampling the local cuisine is a delight, particularly for those who enjoy the spice of the locally grown chili peppers. The island's name translates as 'chili pepper', and those with discriminating palates may taste the concoction known as sambal, a condiment with a flavour of fire that is commonly used as a dipping sauce for Indonesian-style food, or cooked into other foods such as grilled meet to add a special zest.

A short walk from the village, hikers discover the cooling Senaru Waterfalls, just right for a refreshing respite. To soothe tired muscles, experience the traditional Sasak massage and then shop for local crafts such as vibrantly coloured tapestries, woven in the same manner for years, and unique handmade pottery.

And, of course, the diving or snorkelling amid the azure ocean depths and the colourful coral formations is exhilarating. Diving and snorkelling businesses can accommodate a number of visitors. Take a boat to one or more of the best designated locations to view the deep blue ocean, its colourful coral reefs and rock formations, and the varied species of marine life, including turtles, rays and many species of tropical fish.

The timeless beauty and adventure of Lombok will take your breath away, and this tropical glimpse of Eden will capture your heart as well.

DIVING OR SNORKELLING AMID THE AZURE OCEAN DEPTHS IS EXHILARATING



A spectacular sunset sinks in the west, signalling the end of the day on the island of Gili Meno

45

GILI ISLANDS

From nearby population centres, the hop to the Gili Islands is easily accomplished. Fast-boat departure points are located on Bali and Lombok, while budget-minded travellers may consider the public ferry, a longer journey but more affordable. The ferry plies the sea from Bali to Lombok. From there, public transportation and a charter or public boat service access the Gilis.

The three primary islands – Gili Trawangan, Gili Meno and Gili Air – remained quiet and virtually undiscovered by the tourism industry until the 1990s. Since then, development has been controlled in order to preserve the natural beauty and wonders of the islands. The demand for accommodation regularly outstrips availability, and visitors may expect to pay higher prices than on Lombok or Bali. However, the investment in lodging is worth the admission to the pristine areas of the islands where hiking, birdwatching, sunbathing along the beaches, and simply immersing oneself in the awesome surroundings is an unparalleled experience.

Gili Trawangan, the largest of the three islands, offers a pulsating nightlife and numerous dining options, including upscale restaurants. The smallest island, Gili Meno, is also the most pristine and unaltered with development. Gili Air is near both and provides a convenient location to experience a more rapid pace and then retire to quiet and relative solitude.

The Gilis are growing steadily in popularity for their sandy beaches, clear blue waters, and spectacular sunsets visible in the western sky above the volcanic Mount Agung on Bali. Snorkelling and swimming are common activities, but for those wishing to stay dry, glass-bottom boat excursions are a fantastic alternative for viewing the abundant marine life off the coral reefs. The Gilis are known among diving enthusiasts as the 'Turtle Capital of the World', and at least 25 dive sites among the three islands cater to experienced divers and beginners.

Mount Fuji

46

An enduring symbol of the spirit of Japan, Fuji is so much more than a mountain

Japan's Mount Fuji is one of those rare landmarks of the Earth, a masterpiece of nature – a stoic, cylindrical monument in perfect symmetry with both the heavens and the Earth.

Towering more than 3,700 metres (12,100 feet) over the prefectures of Shizuoka and Yamanashi, on Japan's island of Honshu, it has long been revered in the indigenous Shinto faith as the home of the kami, or spirit, Princess Konohanasakuya. Adding to the allure is its status as an active volcano, a gateway into the planet's very own epicentre of creation.

On a clear day, the mountain can be seen more than 80 kilometres (50 miles) away, from the cities of Tokyo and Yokohama. Its image has captured the imaginations of poets and artists for more than 1,000 years – so evocative, it was used by both the Empire of Japan and the Americans during World War II to encourage, and dissuade, Japanese troops.

Climbing this unparalleled marvel is beyond your average hike; for the Japanese, it is a rite of passage, a journey along the heartbeat of Japan's very soul. As one proverb states: "A wise man will climb Mt Fuji once; a fool will climb Mt Fuji twice."

The mountain is a pilgrimage site, and not just for its various Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. Roughly a third of the 300,000 adventurers who scale the mountain every summer travel from across the world.

The most popular hiking route is the Yoshidaguchi trail, which begins at Kawaguchiko Gogome 5th station and leads 15 kilometres (nine miles) up towards the summit. This can be reached from Tokyo via the Keio Express bus from Shinjuku. The trail takes six hours to ascend and three to return – a journey that many like to break with a short rest at one of Fuji's various mountain huts.

Though only the most basic of respites, sometimes comprising a shared space on the floor, these cost around £35 ($46) for a night, with hot meals available for an additional £7 ($9). These are ideal for inexperienced hikers, who may need longer to adjust to the change in altitude, even if just for a few hours, or those who wish to see the Sun rise over the mountain's summit. More luxurious lodging is available, but this can cost in excess of £55 ($73) a night – and all accommodation should be booked far in advance, especially during busy periods. Hardy hikers who push straight through to the mountain top are rewarded with a delicious meal of noodles, curry or ramen at a selection of restaurants.

One of the best ways to enjoy the mountain from afar is with a trip to the onsen, or hot springs, resort town of Hakone. Its network of railways, cable cars, ropeways and the infamous pirate ships offer fantastic views of the mountain – though visibility is notoriously unpredictable. The Fuji Five Lakes region, especially Lake Kawaguchiko, at the foot of the mountain, is also home to cherry blossoms and a brilliant base for a wide array of outdoor activities, from fishing to skiing – not to mention the beloved Fuji-Q Highland amusement park.

Fuji Five Lakes makes for a wonderful starting point, with plenty of hot springs, hikes, museums and theme parks to enjoy

Essential information

To avoid crowds, steer clear of climbing during Obon week in mid-August.

Best time to visit

Early July to mid-September (for climbing season)

Time zone

UTC+9

CURRENCY
¥
JAPANESE YEN

Useful sites

WWW.FUJISAN-CLIMB.JP/EN
WWW.FUJIMOUNTAINGUIDES.COM/MOUNTAIN-HUT-RESERVATIONS.HTML
WWW.JAPANESEGUESTHOUSES.COM

Picturesque Palolem Beach is one of Goa's most popular resorts with tourists

Essential information

Budget-conscious travellers should avoid visiting over the Christmas and New Year period, when prices rocket.

Best time to visit

November to March (to avoid monsoon season)

Time zone

UTC+5:30

CURRENCY

₹

INDIAN RUPEE

Useful sites

WWW.THEBICYCLETRIPGOA.COM
WWW.ANAHATARETREAT.COM
WWW.GOAEXPERIENCE.CO.UK

Goa

Once the epicentre of hippies, hedonism and full-moon parties, India's Goa is now all grown up

A melting pot of Indian and Portuguese cultures, Goa's picture-perfect beaches, ancient temples, freewheeling spirituality and seductively accessible nature have transformed it from a hippie hideaway to a bucket-list regular.

Blessed with mile after mile of gorgeously golden shoreline and blindingly blue water, Goa's beaches are deceptively diverse. From secluded palm-fringed coves to talcum-powder-soft stretches and sunrise yoga to soundtracks of gently throbbing bass, each has something unique to offer.

While much of northern Goa's coastline has been heavily developed, tranquillity can still be had at Mandrem Beach – a gorgeous spit of ticklishly soft sand separated from the village by a shallow creek. Frequented by kite-surfers, Ayurveda disciples and meditation pupils, it is no longer the well-kept secret it once was. But, early each morning, fishermen still come and go, unloading their brightly coloured boats in the shade of coconut palms. Turtles and crabs usually outnumber the swimmers on this sweep of fawn sand, dotted with laid-back eateries dishing out delicious bowls of curried fish and fresh coconut.

Aside from postcard-perfect Palolem, which has become overrun with resorts, southern Goa is sleepier than the north. Veiled by dense jungle is the pristine, hidden beach of Cola. Secluded for most of the year, facilities are minimal, but that's all part of the charm, as is the turquoise lagoon that dissects the shoreline. Home to sea eagles, monkeys and even the occasional dolphin, it's the perfect place to play Crusoe.

Further south, stretching two kilometres (1.2 miles) and bookended by impossibly green, vegetation-cloaked cliffs lies Agonda – its coastline sprinkled with minimalist bamboo huts. Each September, the tranquil cove serves as a nesting ground for the endangered olive riddle sea turtle, as does the almost-deserted Galgibag – its cumin-coloured sand lined with a swaying curtain of casuarina pines.

Away from the beaches, Goa's state capital Panaji is a cultural crockpot, resplendent with faded remnants of Portuguese rule. But nowhere is this felt more than the old Latin quarter of Fontainhas, where cobbled streets are flanked by ochre-hued colonial-era mansions. Across the rest of the city, cafes and quaint chapels rest beside backstreet bars and multi-storey malls. Sitting proudly atop a hill is the distinctive church, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, with its crisscrossing staircases. Down on the banks of the Mandovi River, come nightfall, another world emerges, as ferry boats rub shoulders with floating neon-clad casinos.

A short drive from Panaji is Anjuna, home to a weekly flea market since the 1960s. While fewer flower children are selling well-worn belongings to fund the rest of their journeys along the Hippie Trail, it remains a Goan institution. Today, chai stalls and bamboo kiosks peddle trinkets, spices and saris from as far as Tibet and Kashmir.

To the south lies Ponda, the cultural and spiritual heart of Goa. Sprinkled amid the rice paddies and mangroves are enchanting Hindu temples, including some of the country's oldest. The region is also home to a number of tropical spice plantations, like the 200-year-old Savoi Plantation – an organic farm, which harvests cardamom, turmeric and clove, alongside pineapple, coconut and jackfruit.

Island-hopping tours, aboard wooden banca boats, take visitors to the outermost reaches of El Nido

Essential information

Groups of four or more should hire a private banca to chart their own route, free from the crowds.

Best time to visit

November to March (for best weather); March to May (for best diving)

Time zone

UTC+8

CURRENCY
₱
PHILIPPINE PESO

Useful sites

WWW.ELNIDORESORTS.COM
WWW.ELNIDOBOUTIQUEANDARTCAFE.COM
WWW.ELNIDO-OFFICIAL.COM

El Nido

Secret beaches and a raucous underwater world, the Philippines' El Nido is as idyllic as they come

Made up of 49 limestone isles, El Nido lies 238 kilometres (148 miles) north of Palawan's tropical capital. The gateway to the Bacuit Archipelago, one of Asia's most beloved natural treasures, El Nido's unspoilt beauty and rich biodiversity has been fiercely protected since 1991. Beyond the untouched beaches, prehistoric geologic formations give way to blue lagoons, and exotic marine life takes centre stage.

For sun worshippers, tropical paradise awaits on El Nido's many palm-fringed shores, where sea turtles nest on cotton-white sand, and butterflies fill the warm, salty air, resting on frangipani and bright bougainvillea. The only way to explore the archipelago's deepest nooks and crannies is to island-hop aboard traditional banca fishing boats.

North of the patchwork town of El Nido, Nacpan Beach stretches over three long, gorgeous kilometres (1.8 miles), embracing its twin, Calitang Beach, on the southwest tip. Watched over by a natural viewpoint, the turmeric-tinged sand is caressed by the warm ocean currents. Here, the only sounds are lapping waves and clicking geckos.

Another pristine patch – where the sand is icing-sugar soft, the ocean aquamarine, and eagles swoop overhead – Secret Beach is hugged by imposing limestone cliffs. Meanwhile, the laid-back Marimegmeg is best suited for colourful cocktails and tangy crab curry under the shade of coconut palms. As the wavering sun projects a rainbow, the beach transforms into an alfresco disco. Further north, curtained by verdant jungle, the remote Duli Beach offers up phenomenal surf breaks and deserted sands – the beating heart of El Nido's vibrant surfing community.

The adventure continues beneath the water's surface. Teeming with more than 100 species of coral and 800 tropical fish species, El Nido's biodiverse marine sanctuaries attract scuba divers in search of spectacular reefs and unusual underwater life. The shallow crystalline water of South Miniloc, El Nido's most famous dive site, is home to scorpion fish, seahorses and chevron barracuda. Another popular site, North Rock boasts kaleidoscopic coral tables, passing blacktip reef sharks, sea cows and dolphins. Night-dive utopia Nat Nat crawls with critter-hunting hermit crabs and Spanish dancers.

For landlubbers keen to challenge their limits, El Nido's crisscrossed hiking trails follow a tapestry of karst formations, marble cliffs and waterfalls. Fortress-like, the limestone Taraw Peak, towering 230 metres (755 feet) heavenward, presents El Nido's toughest challenge. The near-vertical trail is not for the faint of heart, requiring some scrambling skills to negotiate the steep drop offs. Summiteers are rewarded with a bird's-eye view of the Bacuit Archipelago, its azure ocean dotted with anchored boats.

For inexperienced climbers, the canopy walk, El Nido Taraw Via Ferrata, offers a safer, more relaxed alternative. With stairs, scaffolding and suspension bridges, the trail makes scaling the geological monolith more a walk in the park than a dance with death.

Those in search of history trace the region's deep roots to Ille Cave. Believed to be over 14,000 years old, the chamber was used as a Stone Age burial site, and in 1998, 20,000 artefacts, such as stone tools and shell beads, were excavated from its limestone belly, as were tiger bones – the first evidence of these majestic creatures in the Philippines.

Lake Issyk-Kul

49

Tucked into the mountains of eastern Kyrgyzstan, Lake Issyk-Kul has drawn visitors for centuries

The jewel in the crown of two mountain ranges that soar skyward in eastern Kyrgyzstan, Lake Issyk-Kul glistens in the summer sun, shimmering during winter days as well, and providing a year-round playground for adventurers. The lake is the seventh deepest in the world, tenth largest by volume, and second only in size among saline lakes to the vast Caspian Sea.

Encompassing 6,236 square kilometres (2,408 square miles), Lake Issyk-Kul is a wonderland for the traveller and a trove of subject matter for scientific study and evaluation as well. Situated along the ancient Silk Road, it beckons to those seeking fresh mountain air, stunning views, and health-related resorts. Nicknamed the 'Pearl of Central Asia', the lake is embraced on all sides by the Terskey and Kungei Ala-Too mountains of the northern Tien Shan range, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Its crystal waters average a depth of more than 278 metres (913 feet), while the surrounding peaks soar to more than 4,855 metres (15,928 feet).

Despite the lake's altitude of 1,607 metres (5,272 feet) above sea level, the climate is relatively mild, both in winter and summer, with moderate temperatures and seasonal snow. The focal point of the surrounding area for commerce and urban living is the town of Cholpon-Ata, a drive of 262 kilometres (163 miles) from Bishkek, the capital city of Kyrgyzstan. On the northern shore of Lake Issyk-Kul, Cholpon-Ata offers hotel accommodation and thriving bars and restaurants. Beaches are scattered at lakeside, a short walk from the centre of town. Several major air carriers serve Bishkek, and car rental facilities are located in the airport. Kyrgyzstan Air Company operates flights into Cholpon-Ata.

While Issyk-Kul was not well known in the West until Russian explorers published accounts of their journeys in the 1800s, the surrounding area was well populated for centuries. Ancient history abounds, and the crossroads of cultures is apparent in petroglyphs left by peoples of the past. Ruins of towns that bustled with activity centuries ago remain, some along the shoreline and others submerged beneath the deep blue of the lake. With the decline of the merchant traffic along the Silk Road during the 15th century, the population ebbed, but the allure of the region revived with its spectacular blend of mountain and lake, water and stone, ancient and modern.

Today, Lake Issyk-Kul welcomes hiking enthusiasts, who find the winding courses exhilarating. At Altyn Arashan, visitors complete their trek with a soaking in the hot springs. Others choose to sunbathe along the lake's shore, and during the winter months the ski resort of Karakol is quite busy. About a half-hour drive from Karakol, the Jeti-Oguz, or Seven Bulls, rock formation of striking red sandstone emerges in a scenic valley, and the location of the town on the eastern edge of Issyk-Kul makes it ideal as a base for excursions into the surrounding area.

Lake Issyk-Kul was a popular holiday spot during the Soviet era, and numerous health facilities, holiday homes and small rentals were built. Recently, an economic resurgence has led to the construction of new resort properties.

The southern shore of Lake Issyk-Kul is picturesque, with the peaks of nearby mountains capped with snow rising in the distance

Essential information

Lake water is not drinkable due to its high mineral content.

Best time to visit

Mid-June to mid-September

Time zone

UTC+6

CURRENCY
C
KYRGYZSTANI SOM

Useful sites

ADVANTOUR.COM/KYRGYZSTAN/ISSYK-KUL.HTM
SILKROADEXPLORE.COM/PLACES/LAKE-ISSYK-KUL
SOUTHSHOREKG.COM/ABOUT/SOUTH-SHORE-ISSYK-KUL

The homestay makes it easy for guests to enjoy a concise, holistic experience of Chiang Mai's main attractions

Essential information

When visiting hill tribes, be sure to choose an ethical tour operator.

Best time to visit

October to February (for cool, dry weather) or April to October (to avoid the crowds)

Time zone

UTC+7

CURRENCY
฿
THAI BAHT

Useful sites

WWW.TOURISMTHAILAND.ORG
WWW.TRAVELHUBCHIANGMAI.COM
WWW.GUESTHOUSE-CHIANGMAI.COM

Chiang Mai

Thailand's Chiang Mai is a celebration of tradition and contemporary culture

Set amid the mountains and rainforests of northern Thailand, the coolest part of the country, literally and figuratively, is Chiang Mai. Once the capital of the Lanna Kindgom, which ruled northern Thailand for half a millennium, it is today the country's second-largest city, sitting along the border of Myanmar, surrounded by hill tribe villages.

At its heart is the Old Town, a striking example of traditional Thai architecture, contained within a moat and a rare example of extant city walls. The sleepy centre makes for remarkable walking, through the eastern Tapae Gate and into Wat Chiang Man, the city's oldest Buddhist temple – built in 1296 by the first Lanna king, Mangrai. A classic example of Lanna architecture, it boasts a chedi, or stupa, held up by an elaborate group of stoic elephant buttresses.

One of the city's most beautiful temples is Wat Phra Singh, 'The Temple of the Lion Buddha', hosting hundreds of monks and novices. The 14th-century monastery's assembly hall makes a lavish display of power – with a teak exterior, adorned with ornamental accoutrements in gold and ochre. Inside, walls feature elegant murals, depicting local and Buddhist folklore, leading up to a rear wall of red lacquer and gold leaf. Here sits the highly venerated Phra Singh Lion Buddha, which is paraded through the city every April during the Thai New Year festival, Songkran, when revellers sprinkle it with water.

Though the nearby Wat Chedi Luang is not the largest temple in the area, it boasts a magnificent chedi (pagoda), which stood as Chiang Mai's tallest structure, at 85 metres (279 feet), until an earthquake knocked it down to 60 metres (197 feet). Commissioned by King Saen Muang Ma to hold his father's ashes, it took a century to build, and once housed the Emerald Buddha – the country's most revered icon.

At the edge of the Old Town, Somphet Market sizzles up local snacks. Beyond is a plethora of cafes, art galleries and modern restaurants, representing the simultaneous embrace of tradition and modernity that has transformed Chiang Mai into a tantalising foodie and coffee-lovers' destination. Centred around Nimmanhaemin Road is the city's capital of 'cool', awash with antiques, handcrafts, boutiques and Instagrammable cafes – such as Gongdee, which fuses furniture, art and design with a strong brew.

Just outside the city, the Baan Kang Wat artists' village unites traditional and modern architecture, enveloped in greenery. Its eccentric vendors sell local, organic and sustainable goods, alongside hair salons, a library cafe and yoga studios – many of which offer workshops for those eager to learn pottery and other crafts.

Chiang Mai has become a haven for the hungry-minded, providing a gorgeous natural backdrop for an endless array of courses, workshops and retreats. May Kaidee's Cooking School, which started in Bangkok in 1988, teaches visitors about Thai cuisine, and how to make various traditional dishes, using only vegetarian or vegan ingredients. Meanwhile, Sammy's Organic Thai Cooking School lets aspiring chefs choose which dishes they want to learn, on a farm outside the city. Others like to delve deeper into some of the other Thai arts, such as Muay Thai. Drawing upon traditional Thai Medicine, the Old Medicine Hospital teaches visitors how to deliver a back-walking Thai massage – without sending anyone to hospital.

Chiang Mai is also a beacon for thirsty spiritual wanderers, with a wide variety of yoga, wellness and energy-healing schools, courses and

ASIDE FROM NATURAL BEAUTY, CHIANG MAI IS SURROUNDED BY HILL TRIBE VILLAGES

teachers. With the city surrounded by beautiful temples, it is a natural lighthouse for the soul. From shamanistic healing to yoga, there are myriad outlets spread across the region. An hour outside the city, The Pavana Resort hosts a whole range of retreats, orientated around detoxification, healthy eating, exercise, breathing and clearing the mind.

Elsewhere, Origin Thailand features a reconstructed traditional village, where guests can delve deeper into Thai etiquette, music, dance, flower arrangement and textiles. Back in the city, contemporary jewellery shop Nova also offers classes in Chiang Mai's art of silversmithing. On Saturday nights, Wualai Road, once known for its silver and lacquer workshops, turns into a bright, colourful market – a favourite walking trail among city-break pilgrims. A larger, one-kilometre (0.6-mile) market, complete with bars and food vendors, runs on Sundays between Tha Phae Gate and Ratchadamnoen Road, but this gets far busier.

Though dizzying, Chiang Mai's oldest bazaar, Talat Warorot, is a treasure trove of surprises – from daily essentials and cooking utensils to delicious treats and trinkets. Set beside the Talat Ton Lam Yai flower market, it rests against the Ping River, which vendors traditionally used to haul in local produce. The river can be navigated by kayak, scorpion-tailed boat or even a full-on dinner cruise, with a quick expedition of a local riverside farmhouse, growing fruits, herbs and flowers.

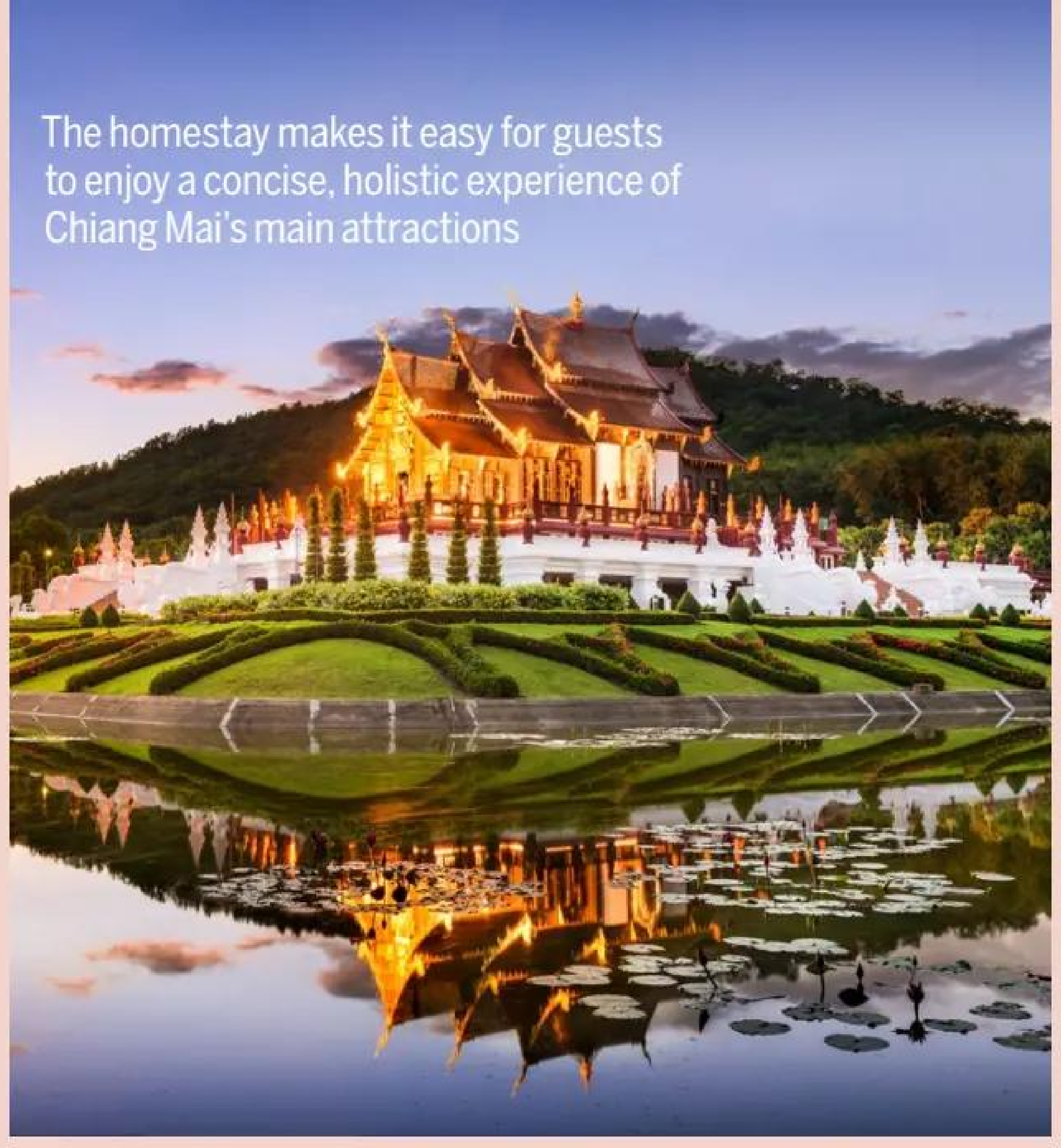
Adrenaline-addicted adventurers need not feel left out, with white-water rafting trips down the Pai River complemented with a zipline session through the rainforest. Those who prefer the company of birds and waterfalls will enjoy hikes through Wat Phra That Doi Suthep, Doi Chiang Dao and Doi Inthanon National Park – home to Thailand's tallest mountain, with a modern temple sat atop.

©Alamy

The women of Padaung, a subgroup of the Karen hill tribe, are famous for their incredibly long necks, stretched slowly using brass rings

Aside from natural beauty, Chiang Mai is surrounded by hill tribe villages, migrated from various parts of China and South East Asia. The largest group, the Karen, are refugees from Myanmar. Women from the Karen subgroup, the Padaung, are instantly recognisable by their incredibly long necks, stretched slowly with a series of heavy brass rings, and colourful clothes. Many even have blackened or rotten teeth, from chewing betel.

For those really looking to go off the grid and immerse themselves in a forgotten culture, homestays are available. The Chai Lai Sisters Karen Homestay remains a comfortable compromise, with limited electricity courtesy of solar panels, and profits going towards a charity for at-risk ethnic minority and refugee women. After an extensive exploration of the city, it could be argued, there's no better way to immerse in the region's natural wonders, culture and hospitality than a night under the stars in the middle of the rainforest.



The homestay makes it easy for guests to enjoy a concise, holistic experience of Chiang Mai's main attractions

JOY'S HOUSE

For travellers hoping to enjoy the full breadth of Chiang Mai's many faces, Joy's House makes a brilliant base. The family hosts guests in a beautiful home with a swimming pool, from where a variety of tours tackle Chiang Mai's greatest hits. From one-day cooking experiences to week-long expeditions, Joy's House offers a more personal touch than your average tour guide – whether visiting hill tribes, exploring caves, going bamboo rafting or navigating the Mekong River.

Joy's House also runs a spa, which not only offers Thai massages and aromatherapy treatments, but extensive courses. Guests can earn a diploma in Thai massage, or enjoy a week-long yoga retreat with a qualified teacher. Those hoping to explore the region alone can simply pick their preferred classes and pair them with external offerings. The owners also run the Children's Shelter Foundation, which houses and educates hill tribe children from northern Thailand and Myanmar – with guests welcome to help out.

The city's Saturday Night Market makes for an exciting, yet manageable, walking experience, among a symphony of colours, sights and smells

The 14th-century Wat Phra Singh, home to hundreds of monks and trainees, is an elegant symbol of Lanna prestige

Hot air balloons over the plains of Bagan on a misty morning

Essential information

Motorcycles are available for rent at several locations throughout the city of Mandalay.

Best time to visit

All year round

Time zone

UTC+6:30

CURRENCY
K
MYANMAR KYAT

Useful sites

TOURISM.GOV.MM
GO-MYANMAR.COM/MANDALAY
MYANMARTRAVELINFORMATION.COM/TOP-DESTINATIONS/MANDALAY

51

Mandalay

A city of mystery, Myanmar's Mandalay offers intriguing culture and captivating adventure

One of the world's most storied and celebrated cities, Mandalay glistens in the emerald countryside of upper Myanmar, previously known as the nation of Burma. The commercial and economic centre of the region that also bears its name, Mandalay is a striking contrast of culture, religion, cuisine and natural beauty.

The romance of Mandalay emerged in the West thanks largely to Rudyard Kipling's famous poem *Road to Mandalay*, and for centuries its mystique has drawn visitors to the plateau along the banks of the mighty Irrawaddy River. Natural beauty abounds amid lush jungle. Visitors indulge in nightlife and fantastic fare in some of the world's greatest restaurants, and take in breathtaking architecture related to the region's Buddhist heritage.

Once the royal city of the kingdom of Burma prior to British colonisation, Mandalay is today a modern metropolis. The centre of Burmese culture, Mandalay presents a kaleidoscope of opportunities. The focal point of the city is Mandalay Hill, rising 230 metres (755 feet). Buddhist temples and pagodas are scattered across its slopes, and the panoramic vista from its summit is worth the trek.

The reconstructed palace of King Mindon, which was devastated during World War II, offers perspective on the grandeur that was once the kingdom of Burma. Mindon founded the city in 1857 and built his palace with an imposing walled citadel and surrounding moat. The palace, constructed with 12 gates and 48 turrets, is located in the centre of the city just north of the downtown area. Another must-see attraction is the 18th-century Mingun Pahtodawgyi, the largest pagoda in the country, around ten kilometres (6.2 miles) northwest of the city. The pagoda was unfinished due to circumstances surrounding a mysterious prophecy, but the remnants of several sculpted lions, each 29 metres (95 feet) tall, guard the richly embellished entrance to the pagoda, which soars to a height of 50 metres (164 feet). Take a camera and capture the moment at Mingun Pahtodawgyi and other enchanting pagodas around Mandalay. Then visit the impressive U Bein Bridge, the world's longest teakwood bridge, which was built around 1850. Many of the sites require the purchase of a ticket priced at roughly £7.60 ($10), which is valid for a week.

Shopping abounds in Myanmar, from designer storefronts to street vendors hawking crafts and other local merchandise. Mandalay is forever linked to the waters of the Irrawaddy, and river cruises during the day or evening provide an interesting viewpoint of the bustling city. Booking a guided tour is a preferred option to get the most out of a visit. The culinary heritage of Mandalay is a wealth of influences from the native population, neighbouring China and across Asia. Sampling the sweet and savoury is an unforgettable journey of delight. After dark, the Mandalay nightlife sparkles with clubs, casinos and diversions galore. Step out and experience the fast pace and glitter.

Hotel accommodations in Mandalay range from economical and budget-friendly to mid-range and luxurious. Daily air service is accessed via Mandalay International Airport, and getting around in the city is fairly simple. Its streets are laid out in a grid, and walking is essential in the centre, while taxis and vehicles for hire are readily available to reach more distant sites.

Ubud

See why this sleepy little Indonesian town attracts up to three million visitors a year

Nestled among the verdant mountains and rice paddies of Bali is the dreamy town of Ubud, home to incredible temples, mystical jungle and a plethora of luxury hotels. In the past 200 years, it has developed from a small and unassuming village to become the cultural centre of Bali, renowned for its architecture as well as its arts and crafts scene.

If your wanderlust takes you to Bali, you'll find that Ubud is filled with other dreamers, travellers and adventurous folk from all over the world. Some visitors come to Ubud and are so entranced by its beauty that they decide to make it their forever home. So, you'll find an unusual melting pot of cultures, hear many languages being spoken in the streets, and be able to enjoy the vibrant energy of the town.

But if you prefer the company of animals, in the Sacred Monkey Forest (a short drive outside of town) you can get up close and personal to humankind's closest relatives. Watch out, though – if you're carrying food, the macaques will be able to smell it a mile away, and might attempt to raid your rucksack for tasty treats. It's an experience you certainly won't forget.

If you're looking for a more tranquil vibe, you'll find Ubud has plenty to offer you, too. The town is teeming with temples, most of which date back hundreds of years. You must visit Tirta Empul, a Hindu water temple from the 10th century. Built atop a natural spring, locals still come here to bathe and ritually purify themselves in the waters emanating from the temple's fountains.

If you want to go even further into the past, check out Goa Gajah – otherwise known as 'Elephant Cave'. Originating in the 9th century, it features Hindu and Buddhist architecture, with a bathing pool and a fountain adorned with female personifications of India's most important rivers. However, to get into this sanctuary, you have to pass through the cave, which is designed to look like the mouth of a rather threatening spirit. Enter only if you dare.

A more modern example of Ubud's Hindu heritage is the Saraswati temple complex, which, although a 20th-century construction, looks completely in place with the ancient architecture to be found close by.

Ubud was once home to the local royal family, and one of the town's most popular attractions is the old Royal Palace. It's an 1800s complex that showcases the best in local architecture, and it's colourfully decorated – but you might have to push back the palm fronds to get a look at the finer details. Most of the palace is 100 per cent free to visit, and if you stick around in the evening, you'll be able to catch a stellar performance of traditional dance.

One of Bali's most famous tourist attractions, Tegalalang rice terraces can be found just outside Ubud

Essential information

It's easy to get around Ubud on foot, but you might want to hire a motorbike to go further afield.

Best time to visit

April to October (for the dry season)

Time zone

UTC+8

CURRENCY

Rp

INDONESIAN RUPIAH

Useful sites

WWW.EBIKESBALI.COM
WWW.MONKEYFORESTUBUD.COM
WWW.THEYOGABARN.COM

When you have finished with Ubud's iconic temples and palaces, consider taking some time out of your hectic schedule to practise yoga in one of the town's many yoga studios. Lay your mat down next to the rice paddies, and breathe in the fresh rainforest air as you move through your Vinyasa flows. You'll feel refreshed and energised afterwards – a rewarding feeling Ubud generously bestows upon many of its visitors.

Thai islands

Between Thailand's islands of Phuket, Koh Samui and Koh Phangan, there is enough paradise for everyone

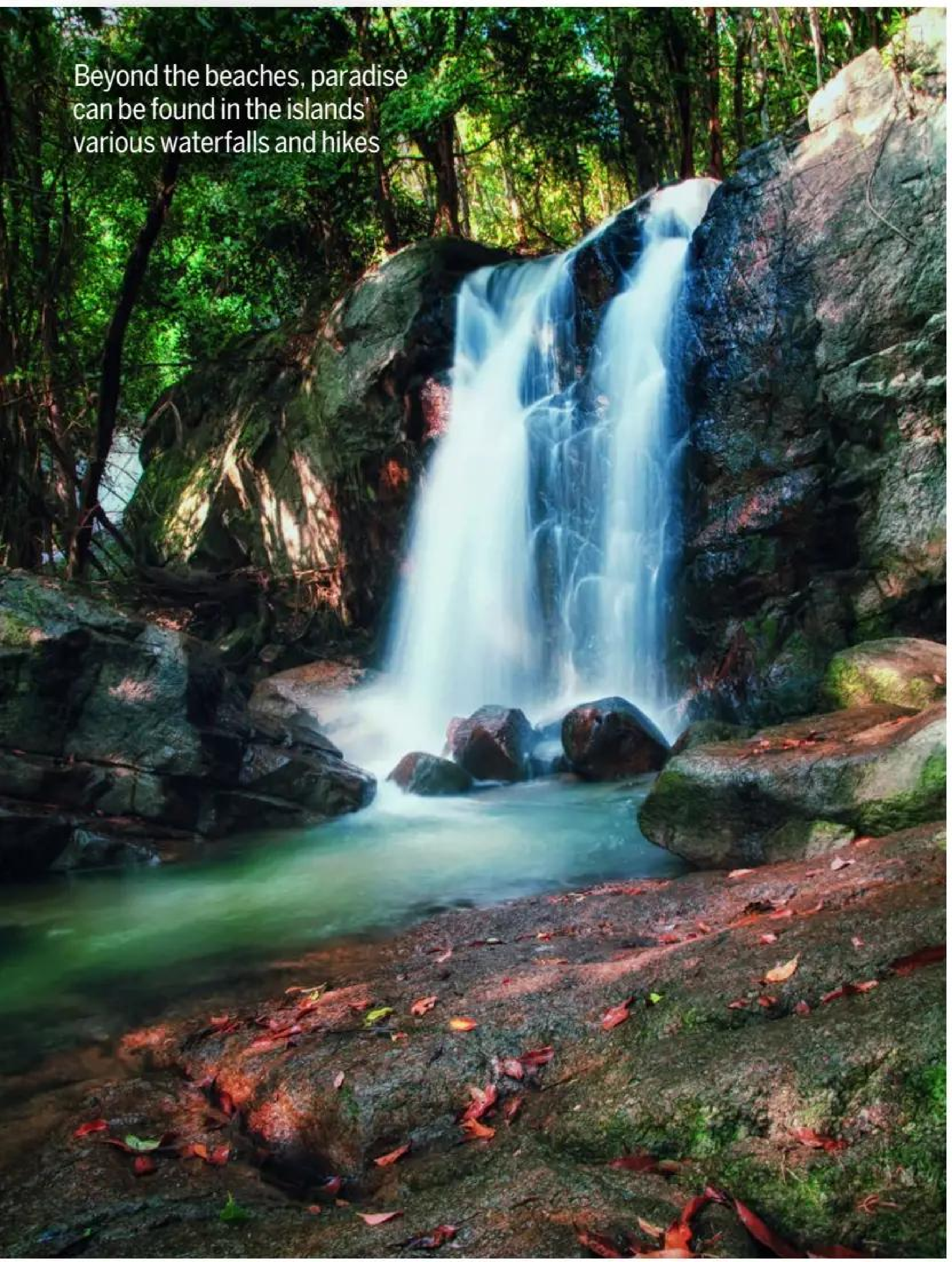
Tropical karsts rising from the glistening sea; pure white sand slipping through toes; the chanting of monasteries – Thailand's islands are the archetypes of tropical paradise.

53

The country's largest isle is Phuket, a former trading post called Jung Ceylon – locally known as Thalang, now the name of its main northern town. However, the island, set in the southern Andaman Sea, is not quite untouched. In the 18th century, it successfully defended its tin mines, fending off a Burmese invasion. Soon after, Chinese, Arab, Indian and Portuguese businessmen began migrating, adding a little spice to the local melting pot.

Those seeking solace will be best appeased in the island's north – a wildlife haven. Sirinat National Park combines coniferous forest, coral reef and 13 kilometres (eight miles) of white sandy beach. Forest meets soft sand at Hat Nai Yang, where baby turtles hatch and crabs scuttle from one shell to the next. The ocean here is a snorkelling gift from the gods – complete with colourful coral reef. At Hat Sanambin, tourism has left more of a mark, with luxury resorts lining up for some of the island's best views.

Further inland is the Gibbon Rehabilitation Project, which aims to counteract the damage done by poaching and animal abuse – healing and protecting a crucial member of the local jungle environment. Visitors are welcome, but are not allowed to take flash photography or interact with the animals, as is done in zoos or less responsible conservation projects.



Beyond the beaches, paradise can be found in the islands' various waterfalls and hikes

Essential information

If you don't like crowds, be sure to avoid the Full Moon and Half Moon parties.

Best time to visit

February to May (for best weather and diving)

Time zone

UTC+7

CURRENCY
฿
THAI BAHT

Useful sites

WWW.TOURISMTHAILAND.ORG
WWW.KOHSAMUISUNSET.COM
WWW.PHANGAN.INFO

Further south, on the eastern side of the island, is Khao Phra Thaeo National Park, home to the angelic Bang Pae Waterfall. Just a short 15-minute hike, the verdant rainforest makes for a stunning picnic spot, and its swimming holes a refreshing break from the hot sun.

On the opposite side of the island is Hat Bang Tao, an eight-kilometre (five-mile) stretch of beach widely considered one of its most beautiful. Though some of it remains a sparse paradise, there are plenty of amenities, such as the stunning Laguna Phuket, which drops a heavy dose of luxury right in the middle of the sun-kissed shoreline. In recent years, the untouched stretch has seen a spike in restaurants, bars, shops and beach clubs – all marked by a higher-than-average price tag.

Further south is a true hidden gem, only spoken of in whispers. A tuk-tuk ride and a precarious walk away, Hat Laem Sing is the tiny, virgin beach all island-hoppers dream of one day finding, yet never quite do.

The stretch is not far from Patong Beach, the island's nightlife capital. Its backstreets are awash with bars, most notoriously Bangla Road, where merry crowds spill into the street – navigating a dizzying network of go-go bars, food vendors, market stalls, clubs and street performers.

The island's diverse cultural heritage is on full display throughout the eastern Phuket Town – where the Old Town drifts between Chinese and Portuguese architecture, where gentrified cafes, art galleries and boutique hotels keep temples and shrines company. The Taoist Samkong

The Full Moon party takes place on Hat Rin beach once a month

Shrine was built by a wealthy Chinese family and continues to play a role in the lives of local villagers, who drop off offerings. It is also where, every year, during the Phuket Vegetarian Festival, hardy devotees make a show of their faith, by piercing their faces with spikes and swords.

Similarly, the small, 19th-century Shrine of the Serene Light is tucked in an alcove, surrounded by colourful, Portuguese-style buildings. The best place to start soaking in the Sino-Portuguese architecture, however, is Thalang Road, which runs through the Old Town, Talat Yai – where the Thai restaurant, Blue Elephant, occupies a stunning restored mansion. It is also home to curiosities like Nguan Choon Tong, the island's oldest herbalist, a novelty whose mystery can be smelled from the street outside.

Not too far away is the resplendent Buddhist Khao Rang Temple, home to the island's first large Buddha icon – set atop Rang Hill, adjacent to the remarkable Khao Rang viewpoint. However, Phuket's real Big Buddha lives near the stunning Chalong Temple, atop a flight of stairs – solemnly looking over the island's rich forest and glittering beaches, with perhaps the finest views of all.

54

Once a quintessential hippie escape, Thailand's second-largest island of Koh Samui has been driven upmarket – a must-stop destination for the region's island hoppers. Mirroring the growing influx of visitors, Chaweng Beach is its busiest and largest – with a mix of families and backpackers jostling for their own slices of paradise. In the main stretch, one

Koh Tao is a great spot if you're after a picture-perfect sunset shot

55

KOH TAO

Set between the islands of Koh Samui and Koh Phangan, Koh Tao is smaller than both, but offers a little of each. Named 'Turtle Island', after its abundant population of sea turtles, its waters are prime diving territory – swarming with the Gulf of Thailand's finest. However, turtles are not the only sea-dwellers in town. While sharks and eagle rays encircle sunken shipwrecks, reef fish hurry among the coral.

The island has 25 dive sites in all, many reached by fishing boat. Meanwhile, its shallow bays and limestone karsts make for stunning snorkelling territory. Lionfish zip by seahorses, gently rocking above zebra-stripe sea kraits, slithering along the sandy bed below. This underwater world truly resembles an alien planet, as flatworms ripple like paper, mingling with polka dot and rainbow-coloured sea slugs.

Koh Tao also boasts abundant jungle hikes, and a party culture with its very own cocktail, the Sangsom bucket – made of Sangsom Rum, Mekong Whisky, Coca-Cola, and the country's beloved energy drink, M-150.

Phi Phi Leh's stunning Maya Bay is so popular, authorities had to close it in 2018

Koh Lanta is among the country's less visited archipelagos

KOH LANTA

This archipelago is among Thailand's trickiest to reach, a journey across air, land and sea. It is therefore among the country's less visited – a stunning set of 52 islands in the southern Krabi province. Although resorts cater to the discerning needs of ultra-luxe travellers, it is still very much a land of naked, pearlescent shores, crystal sea and colourful reef.

Just south of the main Saladan Pier, Phra Ae Beach is dressed in pine trees, with sparse hotels, high-end apartments and delicious restaurants tucked neatly away from the views of paradise.

However, the best beaches are all hidden further south. Klong Jark Beach is not only among its quietest, but a brilliant launchpad for expeditions into the jungle. The crowds continue thinning in the south, towards the Mu Ko Lanta National Park.

As the smaller island of Koh Lanta, Noi is frequented even less by outsiders – its empty beaches, rubber plantations and Muslim fishing villages ripe for exploration.

is never wanting for a bar, beach club or simple wandering vendor, a saviour with ice cream in hand. Unsurprisingly, adjacent to the beach is the island's centre of restaurants, souvenir shops and drinking establishments.

Though still crowded, more solace can certainly be found at Bophut Beach – the so-called Fisherman's Village, named after its historic roots. Here, old Chinese shophouses converge with the rapidly extending fingerprints of modernism – reimagined as a centre of artisanal cafes, quirky restaurants, quaint hotels and on-trend bars. Jet skis and go-karts are on hand for some excitement, and the beach is also the launching point for trips into Ang Thong Marine Park.

The park is a cluster of 42 tropical islets, which can be traversed by speed boat and explored on foot. It is an absolute wonderland for the wanderlusty, with gloomy caves, steeped in stalagmite and stalactite formations, limestone cliffs, saltwater lakes, mangroves and dry evergreen forests to explore. The ocean here is teeming with life, just begging to be experienced by snorkeller and diver alike; from sea turtles to parrotfish and sting rays. On land, the forests boast white-bellied sea eagles, bats, monitor lizards and pythons. Some islands even allow for overnight camping, and kayaking expeditions.

Back on the mainland, Maenam Beach offers up some true peace and quiet, with just enough restaurants to keep visitors happy and fed. Most of the local accommodation is high-end, which means hammocks and pampering.

Although the island has reinvented itself, its hippie roots still run deep, with the tropical paradise a natural setting for many a wellness retreat. Luxurious resorts such as Kamalaya offer up suites and villas, with stunning views of the island's natural wonders – complete with holistic treatment plans, encouraging guests to detox, eat well, meditate and learn yoga.

Meanwhile, the Dipabhavan Meditation Centre offers a slightly more intense, earthy option; a silent meditation retreat, where guests sleep on bamboo beds and wooden pillows, behind mosquito nets – feasting on simple vegetarian dishes.

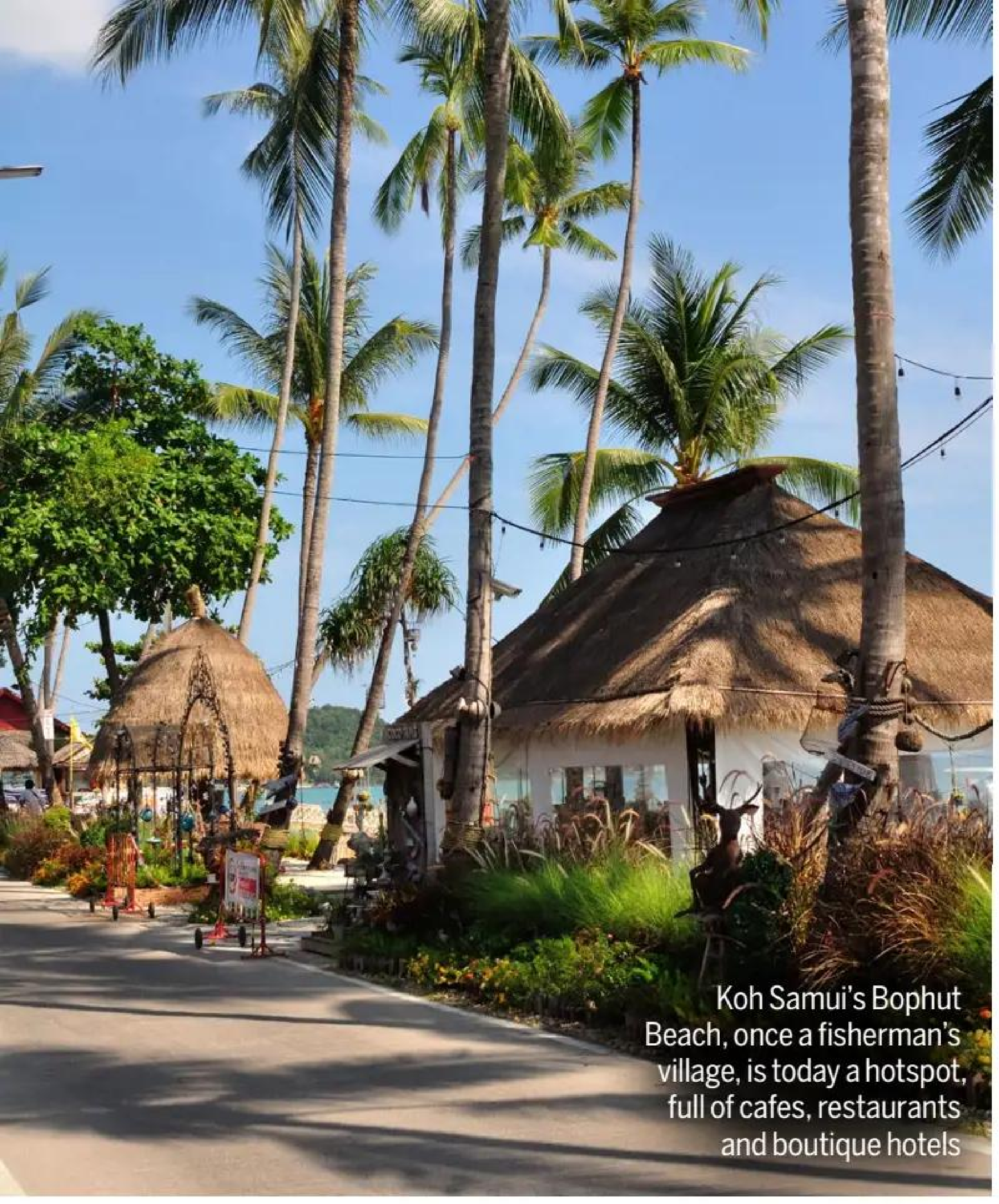
For something a little less extreme, there's always the lure of the yoga retreat – offered in abundance across the island, from the Sunart Centre, tucked away in the mountains, to the Orion Retreat Centre. The latter offers a wide variety of holistic therapy options, such as Reiki healing, with visitors enjoying the comfort of beachfront bungalows and villas on the island's west coast. With an irresistible Thai spa menu hidden away from the noise and crowds, it is a cross between the best of the old Koh Samui, and the new.

For a true spiritual dalliance, Koh Samui's magnificently colourful Wat Plai Laem temple sits atop a lake – standing beside a spectacular statue of the bodhisattva of compassion, fanning her 18 arms, joined by a white laughing Buddha. Donations are rewarded with a bag of fish food, for the many hungry mouths encircling the temple.

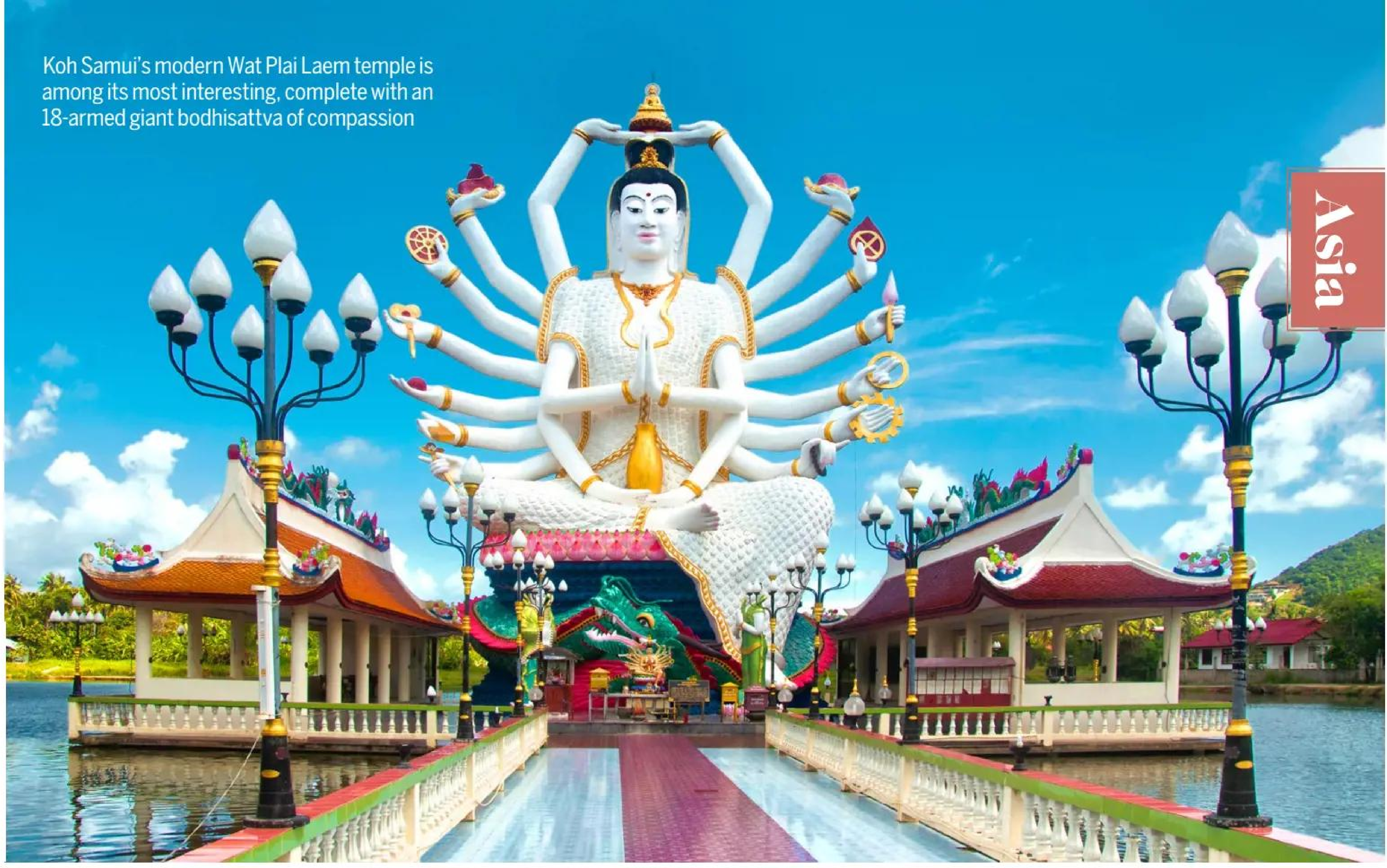
> FOR SOMETHING LESS EXTREME, THERE'S ALWAYS THE LURE OF THE YOGA RETREAT

THE ORIGINAL
FULL MOON
PARTY

Koh Phangan first became famous for its wild Full Moon Parties, attracting revellers from across the globe



Koh Samui's Bophut Beach, once a fisherman's village, is today a hotspot, full of cafes, restaurants and boutique hotels



Koh Samui's modern Wat Plai Laem temple is among its most interesting, complete with an 18-armed giant bodhisattva of compassion

57

The island of Koh Phangan was first made famous for its rambunctious Full Moon Party, where the crescent Hat Rin Beach is transformed into an enormous open-air nightclub-cum-festival. Tens of thousands of neon-clad revellers flock to the event every month, notoriously drinking spirits mixed with energy drinks from buckets.

However, for those who find even the miniaturised Half Moon Party too wild for their liking, the island takes care of its beaches – diligently cleaning them, and avoiding the temptation to open the Pandora's box of overdevelopment. Visitors generally arrive at the port town of Thong Sala, the island's capital, packed with banks, markets, restaurants and other amenities. Martial arts curiosos can even stop by to watch a Muay Thai bout or two, though this is not for the faint-hearted.

The town's night food market sizzles and steams with a delicious array of made-to-order curries, noodles and banana pancakes. Travellers on a shoestring will also enjoy its many 'All You Can Eat' BBQ restaurants, for just £2.35 ($3) a head. Scooters are also available for hire, though it's always a good idea to take photos before leaving the premises.

Of course, the island shines brightest away from the bustle, especially when the lunar partygoers have left. The northern fishing village at Chalok Lam bay sits along one of its prettiest beaches, kept company by an array of wooden and concrete shophouses, and a lingering smell of fish. However, this is no gimmick – the fishermen still haul their fresh catches aboard colourful boats, ready to be enjoyed across the island's various eateries.

Just down the beaten path, where the forest grows wilder, the shrines of Wat Pho and Wat Nok are overshadowed by the island's Yang Na Yai trees. One 400-year-old specimen, at 53 metres (174 feet), is often-called the country's largest of its kind. It's a staggering landmark for Wat Pho's herbal sauna, initially set up by the temple's abbot to heal monks and help them unwind. Today, foreign visitors can enjoy sitting in the sauna, while a stew of herbs bubbles away, feeding them natural goodness to replace the released toxins.

A mountain hike away, on the opposite side of the island, is the stunning Hat Khuat, nicknamed Bottle Beach after the shape of its protected cove. Though it is not the easiest to get to, with its choppy waters often inaccessible to boats, it is well worth the sweat it takes to get there. Isolated and untouched, it is where the forested hills roll rapidly down to white, powdery shoreline; where rocks tease out of the translucent sea, and angelfish dance in the shadows. Coconut trees vie for supremacy, as birds soar heavenwards with the gentle breeze.

Waterfall chasers looking for a change of pace are sure to enjoy the Than Sadet National Park, where the Nam Tok Phaeng waterfall tumbles down a cliff face, feeding the luscious jungle below. Navigating the thickets, full of geckos, banded bullfrogs, monkeys and monitor lizards, is best enjoyed by hikers climbing up the path to the island's highest point, the peak of Khao Ra mountain – 625 metres (2,050 feet) high.

However, one of the country's best sunsets can be enjoyed at the dramatically nicknamed 'Secret Beach' – a sandy cove to the northwest. Though the spot plays host to a scattering of subtle resorts and bars, serving up refreshing strawberry daiquiris, it is not hard to steer clear of the crowds. The reward for daring to venture this far afield is a slow and silent sunset, dressing all the world in its warmth.

Monkeys waiting for food on Monkey Beach

58

PHI PHI ISLANDS

Phi Phi Islands boast some of the world's most stunning landscapes. The smaller of the two, Phi Phi Leh is home to Maya Bay, featured as the idyllic tropical paradise in the 2000 film *The Beach*. Elsewhere, Viking Cave hides within a limestone cliff, harbouring swifts' nests – collected by sea gypsies – and 400-year-old cave paintings, depicting various ships. Visitors can only stop over during the day, as there is no accommodation, and camping is prohibited. Last year, the Thai government closed the bay temporarily, in an attempt to undo some of the damage caused by the roughly 3,700 daily visitors.

Phi Phi Don, the larger island, is rather more developed – with no shortage of accommodation, bars and eateries. Though it remains roadless, one is never too far from thumping bass and strong cocktails. The half-hour, winding hike to Phi Phi viewpoint, brings some solace, with a panoramic view to die for at the top.

Phi Phi Island Village resort offers an escape to the island's north, shielded by thick overgrowth. Further afield, Phi Phi Natural Resort creates even more distance from the crush of crowds and parties, tucked between the forested hills and a beautiful private beach.

The Maldives

Experience the luxury of tropical paradise in the Indian Ocean

Powder-soft sand with coconut trees wafting in the gentle breeze. Crystal-clear water washes over colourful coral reefs, through which even more colourful fish swim. Devoted and smiling waiters have cold cocktails and a platter of succulent fruit ready. If ever a destination lived up to the stereotype of a tropical paradise, it is the Maldives.

The past few decades have seen this small nation, a line of 1,190 tiny islands in the Indian Ocean, transform into a tourist fantasy. There is no better place to escape from a busy world and submerge in luxury. The sense of seclusion is heightened by each resort being housed on its own island, reached by seaplane or boat. Yet the dutiful service is as good as you will find in any five-star city hotel, as are the spa facilities.

Such paradise has made the Maldives a popular choice for newlyweds. Yet the Maldives is increasingly a family destination, too. Although some might baulk at the thought of kids rampaging across the beach and ruining the ambience, an increasing number of hotels and resorts are pitching to parents by offering kids' clubs, plenty of watersports and family activities. Crab racing, anybody?

Those in search of the authentic Maldivian experience can see how locals live in their coastal villages – most resorts offer trips to nearby inhabited islands – or can experience the bustle of the capital, Malé (which is as bustling as a city of 133,000 inhabitants can get). But the Maldives is not a cultural destination for the vast majority of visitors. Most bypass the mosques and shops of the capital, and choose to fly and flop on the beach with an occasional break to flipper into the azure sea.

With water making up around 99.7 per cent of Maldivian territory, those who stay on land are missing out on one of its star attractions. Every island in the nation sits in one of 26 coral atolls, with spectacular reefs providing a home to a wealth of underwater life. Those looking to find Nemo will find clownfish aplenty, not to mention 1,100 other species of fish, turtles, whales, dolphins and sharks. Keen scuba divers will find helpful guides in most resorts, while complete beginners can take their first breaths underwater with qualified instructors. Countless others are happy to slide into the water with a snorkel and watch the fish dart around the coral just below the surface.

However, that the Maldives bobs just above the surface of the sea is a curse as well as a blessing. As the lowest country in the world, with a high point only 5.1 metres (16.7 feet) above sea level, the Maldives is particularly vulnerable to rising sea levels. UN scientists suggest the entire country will have been submerged as early as 2100. Travellers who want the definitive tropical island experience should not wait too long.

White sand, green vegetation and crystal-clear water – the epitome of a tropical paradise

Essential information

Pack a water-resistant or underwater camera to capture the beauty of the coral reef.

Best time to visit

November to April (to avoid the rainy season)

Time zone

UTC+5

CURRENCY
MALDIVIAN RUFIYAA

Useful sites

VISITMALDIVES.COM
WWW.MALDIVES.COM
MYMALDIVES.COM

Explore Ha Long Bay on a traditional Vietnamese junk boat, seen here at sunset

Essential information

Pack a waterproof camera to use while you kayak and explore caves.

Best time to visit

February to April

Time zone

UTC+7

CURRENCY

đ

VIETNAMESE DONG

Useful sites

VIETNAM.TRAVEL/HOME
WWW.VIETNAM-GUIDE.COM
WWW.HALONGBAYTOURISM.ORG

60

Ha Long Bay

Visit Vietnam's splendid Ha Long Bay and explore caves and beaches

Along the northeastern coastline of Vietnam, and 175 kilometres (109 miles) from the city of Hanoi, is Ha Long Bay; an area of more than 1,600 islands and islets covered by rainforests and lined with golden beaches. The giant limestone rocks are a hot spot for cave exploration, swimming, snorkelling and trekking.

Staying on a boat is the best way to experience everything that Ha Long Bay has to offer, and whether you choose a rough-and-ready junk boat, or the more comfortable all-inclusive cruiser option, it's worth staying for at least one night on the water to make the most of your trip to Ha Long Bay and the surrounding attractions.

Organised group tours run out of Hanoi, taking you on a round trip to Ha Long Bay with full-day excursions starting at a reasonable £25 ($32). This often includes transfer from Hanoi, and lunch is also provided. Once in Ha Long Bay, expect a four to five-hour boat trip that will take you on a guided tour of some of the most exciting parts of the Bay. Visit floating villages to see how the locals live in homes built on water and explore hidden caves around the likes of the Thien Cung Cave and the Sung Sot (Surprise) Cave, taking you through underground passages and corridors to see what these giant limestone rocks are hiding. And, when you're not cruising along on a boat, kayaking is the best way to get around the Bay. If you opt for a tour, then kayaks are usually included as part of the excursion.

The island of Tuan Chau is host to beautiful sandy beaches lined with palm trees, as well as resort complexes and tourist attractions that draw in crowds all year round. Accessible via the two-kilometre (1.2-mile) road from the mainland, Tuan Chau is the perfect place to stop off for a few nights in a comfortable two or three-star hotel and to explore Ha Long Bay – or to just kick back, relax and take it all in.

When you're not kayaking through caves or exploring beaches, take a visit to the Sun World Ha Long Park – the biggest amusement park in Southeast Asia. The park sits just on the shores of Ha Long Bay, providing entertainment and rides for all the family. Enjoy a ride on the impressive cable car across to Dragon Park, or check out the Typhoon Water Park to experience a selection of thrilling rides.

Trekking should also be a part of your itinerary while visiting Ha Long Bay. Make it to the top of Poem Mountain for rewarding panoramic views over the surrounding area, and visit Cat Ba Island for a quieter, less crowded escape. This is where you can rent a scooter and ride up and down the incredible island to witness spectacular mountains and breathtaking coastal roads. Staying on Cat Ba Island for a night or two is recommended before heading back to the bustling urban sprawl of Hanoi.

Hong Kong

From the busy markets of Kowloon to the serenity of Lantau Island, Hong Kong is full of surprises

Since the First Opium War of 1842, Hong Kong has remained a land of promise and adventure, first as a vibrant British trading post, and now a Chinese special administrative region. At its heart, it is a vibrant megacity, with a distinct architectural heritage immortalised by virtually every fictional cyberpunk metropolis – from *Blade Runner* to *Ghost in the Shell*.

Its distinctive skyline forms a corridor along southern Kowloon's Tsim Sha Tsui Promenade, where a 44-metre (144-foot) high clock tower memorialises the region's colonial past, beside the Avenue of Stars, paying tribute to the giants of Hong Kong cinema. Further inland, Nathan Road forms the spine of an eclectic mish-mash of high-end luxury stores, enthusiastic restauranteurs, Bollywood-themed merchandise hawkers and Shanghainese tailors.

In the adjacent area of Yau Ma Tei is Temple Street, home not only to a Tin Hau temple, but the Night Market, a sprawling assortment of vendors and traders, featured in many a film. Street food is in no short supply, with piping-hot noodles and fresh seafood on hand to rejuvenate weary shoppers for a second wind of haggling.

Just north, in what was once the triad heartland of Mong Kok is the Ladies' Market, awash with inexpensive clothes for both women and men, as well as gadgets, gizmos and all manner of delightful knick-knacks. While the nearby Tung Choi Street features an array of Chinese pubs, on the opposite side of Victoria Harbour, Wan Chai is marked by its distinct colonial-style bars – a short trip from the upmarket restaurants, boutique art galleries and antique shops tucked along the historic streets of SoHo.

The city's most exclusive postcode, The Peak, is aptly named, whether enjoyed aboard the charming Peak Tram (which has run since 1888) or from 428 metres (1,404 feet) above sea level atop Peak Tower. The area offers a vantage point to reflect on the island's fascinating history.

However, there is much more to Hong Kong than just the city. In the east and northeast, New Territories is Hong Kong UNESCO Global Geopark, a marvel of the natural world, with hexagonal and twisted volcanic columns crawling upwards, alongside a coastline of volcanic rock.

At Central Star Ferry Pier, visitors can catch a ride out to Hong Kong's southern Islands District. From the hiking trails, beach barbecues and rolling hills of Lamma Island to the bun-snatching festival of the tiny Cheung Chau, each of these laid-back isles is a testament to Hong Kong's natural beauty and time-honoured traditions.

Hidden within the verdant mountains of Hong Kong's largest outlying island, Lantau, Po Lin Monastery is given away by a curious landmark – the enormous 34-metre (112-foot) tall, bronze 'Big Buddha'. A pilgrimage site for Buddhists across Asia, the statue sits atop 268 steps, with a peaceful garden and a vegetarian restaurant to boot. Elsewhere, 38 monuments are aligned in an infinity pattern, adorned with the Heart Sutra in Chinese calligraphy – forming Wisdom Path. On the western side of the island is Tai O Fishing Village, a rare collection of traditional stilt houses, with a fish market, cafés and restaurants.

Victoria Harbour, originally known as 'Fragrant Harbour', has long remained the city's lifeline

Essential information

The pre-paid Octopus card is accepted by public transport, grocery stores and vending machines alike.

Best time to visit

October to December (for dry, cool weather), or January to February (to enjoy Chinese New Year)

Time zone

UTC+8

CURRENCY
$
HONG KONG DOLLAR

Useful sites

DISCOVERHONGKONG.COM
TAR.GOV.HK/ENG/ABOUT/INDEX.HTML
SKYBIRD.COM.HK

Strict building regulations have left Bentota's beaches largely clear of bars and restaurants

Essential information

While not all trains stop in Bentota, Aluthgama is incredibly well-connected.

Best time to visit

December to March (for dry-season weather)

CURRENCY

Rs SRI LANKAN RUPEE

Time zone

UTC+5:30

Useful sites

SRILANKAWATERSPORTS.COM
SAMANVILLA.COM
SRILANKA.TRAVEL

Bentota

With endless beaches uncorrupted by traditional trappings, Sri Lanka's Bentota is a tropical paradise

Broad sandy beaches run alongside a frame of thick foliage and paddy fields, quiet enough for one to hear bird calls and the whirring of bicycle wheels against a soundtrack of lapping waves. Despite an abundance of beautiful hotels and resorts, Bentota strikes a rare balance: a tropical paradise, with comfort and luxury in all the right places.

Just a two-hour drive south from Colombo, Bentota's strict building regulations have left its beaches largely clear of bars and restaurants. Intersected with a colourful railway, it is a place that sacrifices convenience and crowds for the sake of splendour and tranquillity.

A careful selection of small boutique hotels and opulent resorts, sprawled along the southern beach, cater to the varying whims of adventurers, hippies and families alike. Perhaps most notably is the hallmark style of renowned Sri Lankan architect Geoffrey Bawa, whose hotels (such as Lunuganga, Club Villa and Villa Bentota) have breathed a touch of contemporary design into the natural landscape – a form often called 'tropical modernism'.

To the north is Aluthgama, a small town boasting a little more bustle, in the form of stalls and a fish market. It sits on the mouth of Bentota River, opposite a thin strip of land, known as Paradise Island. Staring out over the crystalline Laccadive Sea, this is Bentota's go-to hub for watersports – a bonanza of fishing trips, jet skiing, deep-sea fishing, banana boats and windsurfing – not to mention lagoon trips.

A sleepy river safari takes guests cruising past crocodiles, water monitors, chameleons, more than 100 types of bird and other critters hiding in the luscious mangroves. Elsewhere, the Induruwa Sea Turtle Conservation Centre offers the opportunity to learn about endangered sea turtles and watch them hatch.

The river feeds into Dedduwa Lake, overlooked by the 12th-century Galapatha Raja Temple, home to some truly curious Buddhist relics – such as the canine tooth of Buddha's disciple, Kasyapa – within a 2,500-year-old stupa. The lake is also the site of Geoffrey Bawa's country home, Lunuganga Estate. Bawa spent half a century transforming the rubber estate into a landscaped garden, his very own experimental canvas – which remains a stunning testament to his philosophy, life and works.

His brother, Bevis Bawa, who began his working life as a planter on a rubber estate, curated his own magnificent garden at the nearby Brief Garden – a two-hectare (five-acre) madcap jungle masterpiece north of the river. He, too, spent 40 years playing with form and space, producing one of Asia's most beloved gardens, which features sculptures, artwork and antique furniture.

For a change of pace, set between Bentota's river and beach is the bazaar, an eclectic market hawking local trinkets, textiles, carved woodwork and brassware. Just to the south is the Ranra Tea Centre, a colonial-style estate serving up piping-hot brews of its signature Ceylon tea on the picturesque veranda.

While Bentota remains a sleepy paradise for most of the year, at the end of December visitors are treated to the annual Buddhist festival, Perahera. During the celebrations, the town is overrun by spectacular fire jugglers, musicians, dancers, elephants and torch bearers.

Tokyo

Beneath the bright lights, Japan's capital is an endless trove of cultural treasures

Tokyo is a city of impossible contrasts. An endless labyrinth of skyscrapers, bordered by mountain and sea; a neon, retrofuturist dream throttling past pockets of serenity – scattered with historic castles, temples and parks. One of the world's most populous cities, it is understandably among the hardest to truly penetrate. It is Japan at its least nuanced, a window dressing of stereotype, cloaked precariously over an incredibly rich culture, largely unknown to those beyond its bounds.

Among the city's best-known wards is Shinjuku; a microcosm of the city itself, home to its largest railway station, and the Tokyo Metropolitan Government Building. Nestled within its claustrophobic streets is Kabukicho, Japan's grittiest and seediest neighbourhoods – though, tellingly, oft-called one of Asia's 'safest red-light districts'.

Marked by large, red gates, it is a surreal cluster of bars, eateries and restaurants, drenched in artificial light – most notably the Robot Restaurant, where food takes a back seat to spectacle. One of the world's most unmissable shows, Robot Restaurant is a celebration of Japanese stereotype turned up all the way to 11. A feast for the senses does not even begin to explain this bizarre, explosive battle between robot and dancer.

The adjacent area of Golden Gai presents a rare example of older Tokyo architecture, surviving both natural disasters and war. Engulfed on all sides by looming skyscrapers, it is a time capsule, filled with numerous tiny bars, frequented by the city's actors, artists and musicians looking for a peaceful escape from the metropolis beyond.

Offering an even quieter break is Shinjuku Gyoen, a stunning park with three main gardens. The first, in traditional Japanese style, features 1,500 cherry trees, two ponds joined by a small river, and a pavilion built to commemorate the royal wedding of Emperor Hirohito. Elsewhere, a French garden mimics the splendour of Versailles with roses aplenty, while an English garden brings a touch of British charm to the Japanese archipelago. A curious greenhouse also boasts a tropical cocktail of flowers and plants.

The adjacent ward of Shibuya is home to the infamous Shibuya Crossing, an intersection outside the station where, at the turn of a light, seas of people flood across the road, heading towards homes, offices and shops. The area hosts an array of department stores, housed in skyscrapers with floors of restaurants. Shibuya is also considered to be a major driving force behind the country's fashion industry, with many new trends starting here.

Nowhere is this clearer than in Harajuku, an area made famous for its namesake 'Harajuku style' – a wacky hotchpotch of punk, cosplay, kawaii cute, bold colour and all things over-the-top. Beyond a thicket of trees, the spectacular Shinto shrine of Meiji-Jingu is dedicated to Emperor Meiji, whose ascendance stripped power away from the samurai class and thrust Japan into an era of modernisation.

One of Shibuya's more curious landmarks is Love Hotel Hill, where you'll find the capital's highest concentration of love hotels – frequented by couples who don't have anywhere else to spend time alone.

To the east is Tokyo's centre of ultraluxe chic, Ginza. Formerly a silver coin mint, the area was rebuilt after the Great Kanto Earthquake of 1923. Today it houses some of the city's most prestigious brands and malls. Topped by an iconic clock tower, Seiko's Wako building survived the intense firebombing of World War II, an architectural legacy that is today

At rush hour, Shibuya Crossing is engulfed by orderly waves of people

HARAJUKU IS A WACKY HOTCHPOTCH OF ALL THINGS OVER-THE-TOP

Japan's national sport of sumo wrestling is a true spectacle, as two burly men attempt to out-muscle one another

© John Paul Antes

Tokyo Skytree offers panoramic views of the city that never ends

At night, Kabukicho comes alive, as a sea of neon lights (advertising all manner of businesses) battle for attention

Essential information

Buy a Japan Rail Pass before visiting to save money on travel.

Best time to visit

March to May (for cherry blossoms) or September to November (to avoid crowds)

Time zone

UTC+9

CURRENCY
¥
JAPANESE YEN

Useful sites

WWW.JAPAN.TRAVEL
SUMO.OR.JP/EN
JAPAN-GUIDE.COM

Japan's Noh theatre is among the oldest extant theatrical forms

THEATRE

Japanese culture varies greatly from region to region, but the capital of Tokyo is a brilliant gateway to some of the country's most beloved artistic heritage.

Among Japan's most recognisable forms of theatre is Kabuki, which originated during the Edo period, beginning in 1603. Performers don elaborate costumes and makeup, acting out historical dramas on intricate stages, with trapdoors and revolving platforms.

Bunraku theatre, meanwhile, sees a narrator tell a story, accompanied by a shamisen, acted out by puppets. The puppeteers, dressed all in black, animate not just the puppets' limbs, but facial expressions too – requiring a great deal of training and expertise.

Music is also central to Noh theatre, which was developed by 14th-century actor Kan'ami Kiyotsugu and his son Zeami. It is a minimalist, slow and ponderous reflection of themes, narrated by masked performers, often representing supernatural beings.

full of designer brands, a delectable tea salon and an art gallery. The ultramodern Tokyu Plaza, meanwhile, offers a bold contrast, with a kaleidoscopic entranceway – symbolising the country's world-class contemporary design.

A very different shopping experience can be had in Akihabara, a nexus of all things anime. Manga cafes sit alongside shops, overflowing with anime and video-game figurines, alongside electronic shops hawking retro Famicoms and assorted gadgets. Akihabara's 1,300-year-old Kanda-jinja Shinto shrine was famously where the notable rebel Taira no Masakado was enshrined in 940 and deified. Today, it is also represented by the mascot Nozomi Tojo, a shrine maiden from the anime *Love Live!*.

The nearby Ueno Park, originally part of the powerful Kaneiji Temple and one of Japan's earliest Western-style parks, features a long corridor of 1,000 cherry trees – prime hanami, or 'cherry blossom viewing', territory. The park's lotus-covered Shinobazu Pond, boasting an octagonal temple hall, is inspired by Lake Biwa – beneath the Kyoto temple that Kaneiji modelled itself after. Ueno also hosts an array of museums, including Tokyo National Museum and Tokyo Metropolitan Art Museum, as well as Ueno Zoo – the country's first.

In Sumida to the east, a bizarre, huge building rises as if on stilts. This modern behemoth, fashioned after a traditional storehouse, is home to the Edo-Tokyo Museum, a fascinating journey through the 400-year history of Japan's capital. The atmospheric museum offers insight into the development of the city, formerly known as Edo, and the lives of those who inhabited it – examining Japanese architecture and the nation's cultural heritage.

The nearby (ironically small) Sumo Museum makes for a smooth introduction to the sport, which can be enjoyed at the Ryogoku sumo stadium, with a hearty helping of katsu curry and a dizzying drink of Chuhai. Tournaments are held during certain points of the year, and each day wrestlers do their best to throw their opponents to the ground, or push them out of the ring. By the end of the day, the atmosphere is electric, as pairs of Yokozuna duel to a cacophony of shrieking fans and camera flashes.

In the 17th century, sumo tournaments were held in the district of Asakusa, just to the north – then, the centre of entertainment and kabuki. Sensoji Temple is among the city's oldest and most magnificent Buddhist temples. It is preceded by the 200-metre (656-foot) shopping street, Nakamise, where vendors sell souvenirs and distinctive treats, such as amezaiku – elaborate, hand-crafted lollipops.

Just across the Sumida River is Tokyo Skytree, the world's second-tallest structure at 634 metres (2,080 feet). With two observation decks at 350 metres (1,148 feet) and 450 metres (1,476 feet), it makes for a stunning place to take in the city from up high. From here, Tokyo stretches out towards the horizon, a never-ending expanse of light and life.

49

Kathmandu

Become absorbed by Asian culture with a memorable trip to Nepal's exciting capital

Kathmandu is awash with smells, sights and sounds that keep excitement levels at a maximum. Narrow, intertwining streets make way for streams of loud, pushy traffic. Dusty dirt tracks, pot-holed pavements and smells of fragrant spices hit you as you ride down the busy corridors of Nepal's fervent capital.

Anyone who has experienced Kathmandu first hand will happily regale you with stories of how welcoming and friendly Nepalese people are, and how special this capital city is.

From the main airport, jump into a taxi and head straight for the bustling district of Thamel; the commercial heart of the city. This vibrant, noisy district is filled with motorcyclists and cars striving to get ahead of each other, and they are not shy to use their horns. Getting around Kathmandu is best done by foot. You can browse as you pass by numerous shops selling trekking gear, warm clothing and camping goods. For a more laid-back journey, however, you could step aboard a rickshaw peddled by a local tradesman who'll wind you through the streets towards your next destination.

If all this gets too much, take a stroll into the neo-classical historical Garden of Dreams, situated on the outskirts of Thamel. This is where you can escape from the noise and commotion of the centre in a relaxing outdoor setting.

When you're not planning for the next big adventure into the mountains, explore the plethora of stupas, monasteries and religious temples adorning Kathmandu's streets. Gain a stronger insight into how numerous religions (predominantly Buddhism and Hinduism) live in harmony and run deep through the veins of the people and their city. Head out on a tour around the ancient royal complex of Durbar Square to witness grand palaces and their courtyards; or walk the many steps to Swayambhunath temple, also known as the 'monkey temple', for spectacular views over the city's rooftops. Take a trip up to the impressive World Heritage Site of Boudhanath stupa and spin prayer wheels as you pass on by. Enjoy hole-in-the-wall restaurants serving up local dishes such as dal bhat, a lentil-based rice meal, as well as spectacularly spiced curries cooked in plain sight in open ovens.

For those looking to explore further afield, Kathmandu makes for a great starting base. Treat your city break as a stepping stone into the Himalayan mountain range. You could end up exploring routes up to Everest Base Camp, or deeper into the Annapurna mountain range for a longer excursion into the snowy wilderness. Tours take off from Tribhuvan International Airport, flying via Lukla to Base Camp, and can last up to two weeks. Planning well ahead of time is essential so as not to lose your spot. Coaches operate from Kathmandu to Pokhara for excursions into the Annapurna Circuit. Alternatively, book a tour down to Chitwan National Park to enjoy a range of activities such as canoeing, rhino and tiger spotting, as well as elephant riding before heading back to the busy streets of Kathmandu.

Colourful prayer flags with printed mantras blow in the wind, and are said to spread positive energy and goodwill

Essential information

Be sure to drink only bottled water to avoid an upset stomach.

Best time to visit

October to April (to avoid monsoon season)

Time zone

UTC+5:45

CURRENCY

Rs NEPALESE RUPEE

Useful sites

WELCOMENEPAL.COM
EVERTREK.CO.UK
NEPALTOUR.INFO

Orangutans in a wildlife preserve, one of several across the state of Sarawak

Essential information

Maintain safe distances from wildlife, and refrain from touching plants, as many are protected by law.

Best time to visit

March to October

Time zone

UTC+8

CURRENCY
$
SARAWAK DOLLAR

Useful sites

BORNEOADVENTURE.COM
MULUPARK.COM
SARAWAKTOURISM.COM

Sarawak

65

On the Malaysian island of Borneo, Sarawak is a showcase of natural beauty and fragile ecology

Perhaps nowhere else on Earth is the fragile and delicate balance between humanity and nature more evident than in the Malaysian state of Sarawak on the island of Borneo. Verdant jungles abound and roaring rivers weave a tapestry of unspoiled nature throughout the countryside, and while commerce and industry have gained ground, the movement for preservation is working in tandem to protect fragile ecosystems while maintaining the prospect of future economic growth.

The largest of the Malaysian states, Sarawak is the home of such diversity in flora and fauna that their threatened existence has resulted in the establishment of at least ten national parks. Here, rare species of animals and plants are sheltered in sanctuary and visitors have the opportunity to observe – but not disturb – these wonders. Gunung Mulu, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is the best-known of these parks. Attracting more than 120,000 visitors annually, the park is home to over 3,500 species of vascular plants along with 270 species of birds and 81 mammal species. The towering peak of Gunung Mulu, soaring approximately 2,377 metres (7,799 feet) above sea level, dominates the lush landscape, while caves, waterfalls and stunning vegetation are visible at every turn. The easiest way to reach Gunung Mulu is by flying into a regional airport in the northeast or taking a quick trip from the coastal town of Miri. There are several other national parks worthy of exploration scattered across Sarawak, including Loagan Bunut, Kubah, Bako, Niah and Tanjun Datu.

Many visitors are lured to Sarawak each year to catch a glimpse of wildlife that may be seen in their natural habitat nowhere else on Earth, including the orangutan and Borneo pygmy elephant. Bako is the oldest national park on Sarawak and is widely renowned for its population of proboscis monkeys.

Most visitors begin their exploration of Sarawak in the capital city of Kuching, the centre of local commerce and a focal point of the ethnic diversity that is readily apparent in the region, including indigenous native peoples and others of Chinese, Malay and varied origins. The city is served by numerous airlines flying from major cities across Southeast Asia; moderately priced and upscale hotel accommodations are readily available; and short, regional flights to more remote destinations are easily obtained. Kuching is nestled along the banks of the Sarawak River. Its name translates to English as 'cat', so varied locales within the city pay homage to the feline, including several museums. Transportation is always nearby, with taxis and cars for hire. Visitors may stroll the streets and experience the local sights and sounds, while examining crafts and wares from vendors and storefronts.

Adventurous visitors may choose to take a short air or river excursion to the interior of Sarawak, experiencing native villages whose inhabitants still pursue the ancient ways of living, hunting and gathering for sustenance and residing in native longhouses. Book these excursions early and be prepared to negotiate challenging conditions, including hikes and crossings of uneven terrain.

The Gawai Dayak festival occurs each June, and is a popular event for visitors to revel in. Celebrating the harvest and the beginning of another prosperous year, the festival includes costumed dancers, exotic cuisine and a whole month of celebration.

The Ganges

India's sacred Ganges River is the spiritual lifeline that unites all along its banks

So much more than just a river, the colossal Ganges is a way of life. A lifeline for millions living on its shores, it's one of the largest rivers on Earth. Born amid Himalayan glaciers, its waters travel 2,525 kilometres (1,569 miles), bringing alive the vast plains of north India, before emptying into the Bay of Bengal.

Considered holy in Hinduism, the Ganges is worshipped daily, and personified as the goddess Ganga. Legend says that King Bhagiratha persuaded the goddess to travel from heaven to Earth, to wash away and rescue 60,000 long-forgotten trapped spirits. To break her fall, Ganga trickled down the tangles of Shiva's hair to Earth, where she was met by the king, who guided her from the Himalayas, across the plains of India to the ocean.

Today, the fabled riverbanks teem with worshippers, eager to ablute their sins in the mystical waterway and take a small step closer to moksha – breaking free from the eternal cycle of life and death.

From this sacred body springs an array of sprawling cities and rural villages, fiercely individual, yet bound together by the free-flowing vein of spirituality. One of the oldest continually inhabited cities in the world, Varanasi is a cultural and religious nexus. A magical spot where life and death rub shoulders daily, it attracts a tapestry of people – some hoping to wash away their sins or pass away peacefully next to the sacred waterway, others to meditate or cremate loved ones beside it.

Over 100 ghats, stone platforms leading down to the water, line Varanasi's banks. Each day they come to life as a gathering place for the city's inhabitants – where sadhus adopt the lotus position, morning bathers recline against sun-warmed stone, and boatmen usher visitors aboard wooden vessels.

Come dusk, the Dashashwamedh Ghat transforms into a seven-storey stage for Ganga Aarti, an evocative religious ceremony where a fire offering is made to the goddess Ganga. Crowds gather to watch the highly choreographed ritual every night; some board boats for unobstructed views, while others fill the riverbank, nearby rooftops and balconies. The ceremony begins with a loud blast from a conch shell before bearded pandits, clad in golden robes, begin to move incense burners and flames in time to rhythmic chants.

As the ceremony draws to a close, a priest pours water into Ganges, reciting a final ritual prayer before diya, small flower candles, are lit and set adrift downriver, often atop paper boats. The spectacle is also performed in the holy cities of Haridwar and Rishikesh.

And while some festivities embrace life, others celebrate death. Hindus consider Manikarnika Ghat the most auspicious place to be cremated. The dead are carried on bamboo stretchers through the maze-like old town, past temples and sun-faded yellow and red houses, to the Ganges. Wrapped in coloured cloth, they are bathed in the river one last time, before the cremation pyre is lit.

For those in search of solace, early-morning sunrise boat tours offer much-needed respite from the inimitable frenetic energy. As the morning mist rises to the steady swishing of oars, pink-bottomed monkeys swing from rooftop to rooftop, following close behind.

With the mandarin sun edging up from the east, colour and life return to the riverbanks.

> EARLY-MORNING SUNRISE BOAT TOURS OFFER MUCH-NEEDED RESPITE

Essential information

Visit Varanasi during the cultural festival of Kartik Purnima to catch the Maha Aarti, a particularly elaborate Ganga Aarti ceremony.

Best time to visit

November to March (for cool, dry weather)

Time zone

Multiple

CURRENCY

₹ INDIAN RUPEE

Useful sites

VARANASI.NIC.IN
ASSAMBENGALNAVIGATION.COM
UTTARAKHANDTOURISM.GOV.IN

Many ghats, temples and shrines decorate the riverside in the ancient city of Varanasi

Varanasi pilgrims bathe in the Ganges – a ritualistic act of purification

Believers carefully lower themselves into the sacred waters, as the familiar sound of Hindu songs permeates the still morning air.

To the north – in the foothills of the Himalayas, close to the source of the Ganges – lies Rishikesh, a small town thrust into the limelight when The Beatles arrived, seeking enlightenment from the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi in 1968. Since then, it's become a spiritual enclave, attracting Transcendental Meditation devotees and yogis alike. Ashrams line the milky-blue river, offering classes and retreats for every Eastern interest.

But Rishikesh is no longer all mantras and contorted appendages. Transformed from the epicentre of 1960s counterculture, today it is the country's high-octane capital, where adventure seekers are drawn to glacial-pure 3+ rapids, forested peaks and lightning-fast ziplines.

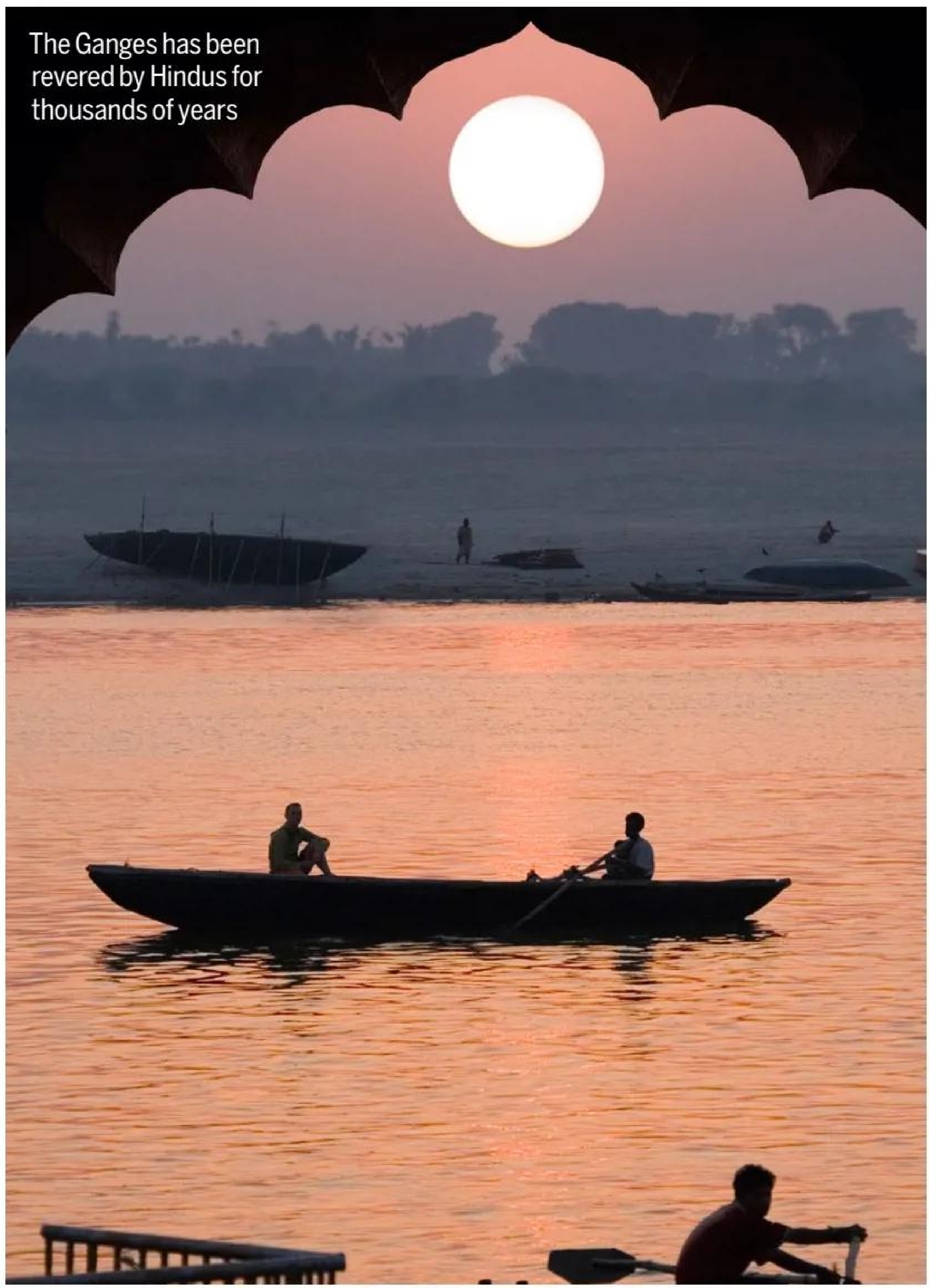
A slower pace can be enjoyed on a multi-day cruise, following the natural ebb of flow of life on the river. While most operators stick to the Ganges' tributaries, Assam Bengal Navigation braves the Ganges proper, thanks to its ships, specially built to navigate the shallow waters.

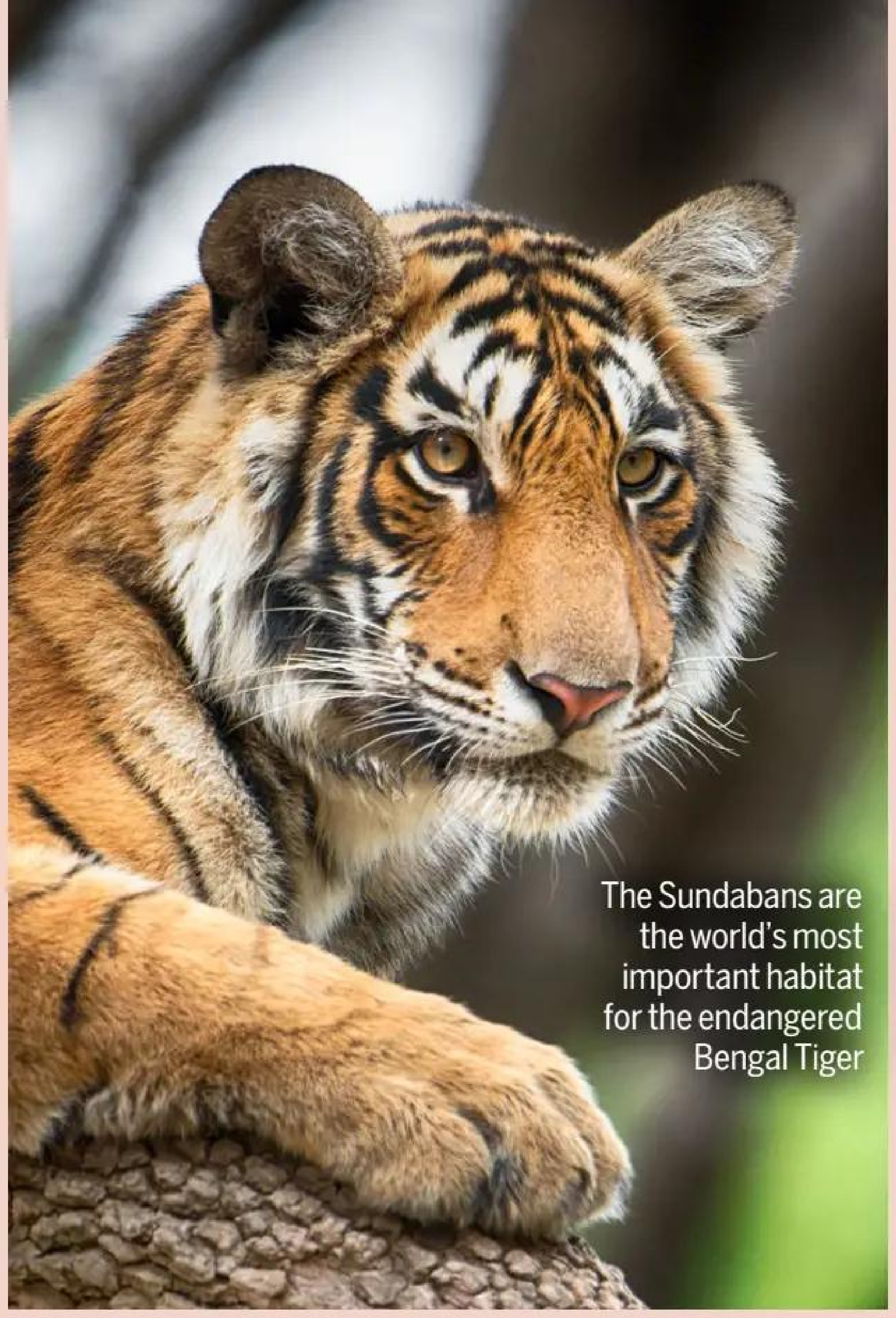
Cruises, ranging from four to 15 nights, pass through picture-book rural India – riverside wattle and daub villages and ramshackle towns rising from sun-baked earth, clear the way for terracotta temples and long-abandoned palaces. Chugging along the coffee-coloured waterway to rarely seen – but vibrantly rich – regions, daily excursions continue on land. The journey follows the footsteps of history, taking in Mughal mausoleums, Raj monuments and majestic mosques, with particular attention paid to Jaunpur and Chunar Forts, Atala Mosque, the battlefield of Plassey and Lord Cornwallis' Ghazipur tomb.

In Kolkata, known as The City of Palaces, the old Dutch, French and Danish quarters have each retained a distinctive flavour, but it's the Missionaries of Charity's Mother House that still draws the crowds – the site of Mother Teresa's grave, as well as the area where she lived and worked for more than 40 years. Elsewhere, Murshidabad, the 18th-century capital of Bengal, is studded with abandoned mosques, ornamental tombs and crumbling palaces. Not far, Baranagar charms with its hand-carved terracotta temples.

The beating heart of Buddhism, Bodh Gaya is believed to be the place where, 2,600 years ago, Prince Siddhartha achieved enlightenment under a Bodhi tree and became the Buddha. To this day, a descendant of the sacred tree still flourishes, and can be visited at Mahabodhi Temple. In Sasaram lies the Afghan-style tomb of the warrior-cum-emperor Sher Shah Suri, who defeated to the Mughals in 1538. Rising from an artificial lake, the domed sandstone mausoleum is nicknamed the second Taj Mahal.

Back aboard the wooden boat, glimpses of rural India continue, as do rare sightings of Ganges river dolphins, breaking the surface. Completely blind, the rose-hued mammals are among the most endangered on Earth. The river's many spectacles can be enjoyed with a cup of musky Darjeeling or a strong Assam brew. The mode of travelling is slow, desperately slow, but such is the nature of the beast.


The Ganges has been revered by Hindus for thousands of years

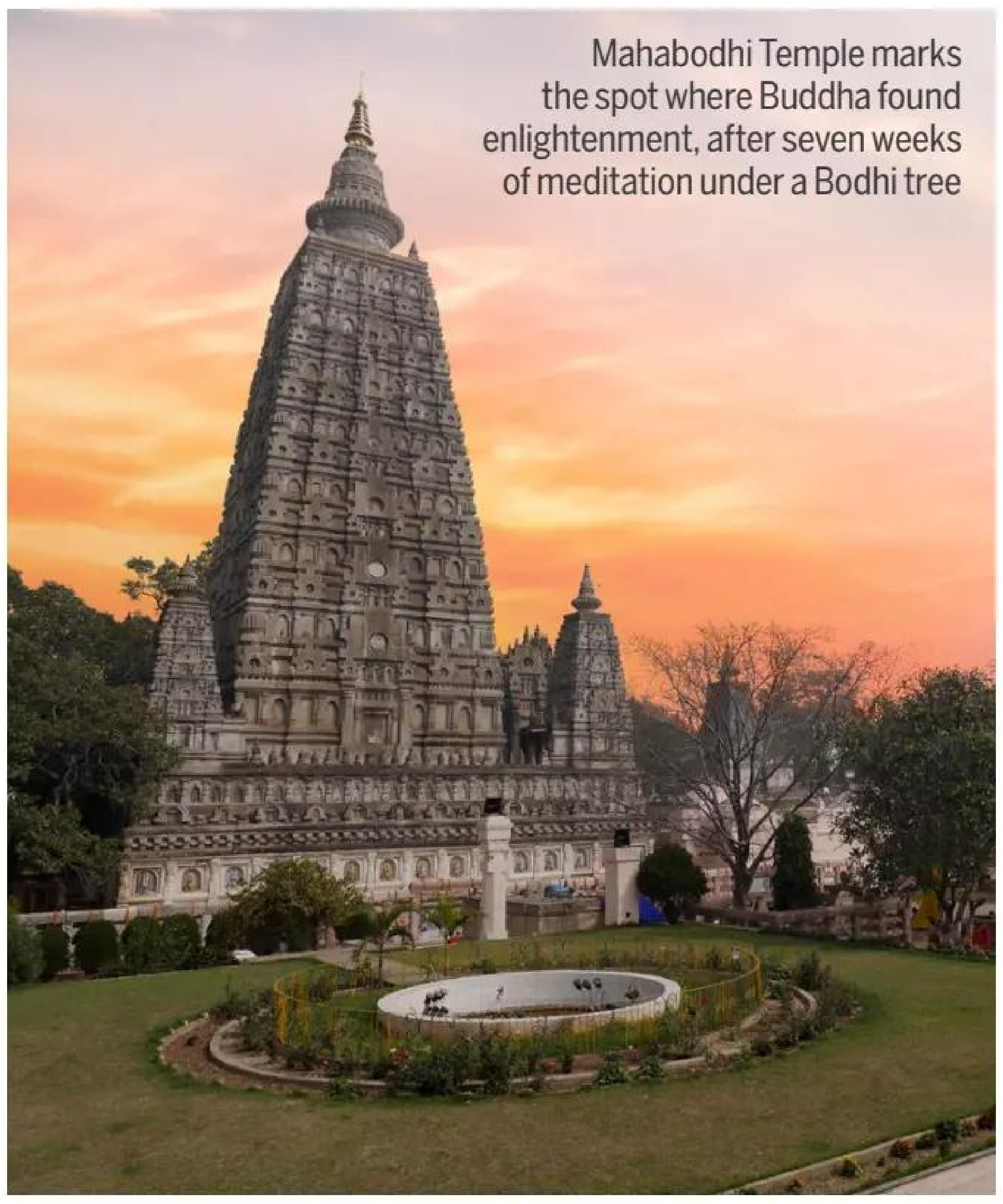

The Sundabans are the world's most important habitat for the endangered Bengal Tiger

THE SUNDARBANS

The biggest mangrove forest in the world, the Sundarbans is home to the planet's largest population of Royal Bengal tigers. Sprawling across eastern India and Bangladesh, the mist-shrouded swamps remain remote and inhospitable. Around 400 man-eating tigers roam the region's dreamy, semi-submerged mangroves.

While the Sundarbans can be explored from both India and Bangladesh, the latter offers the opportunity to venture deeper into the forest. A three or four-day boat trip from Khulna takes travellers into the heart of the region – where the sedate pace of boat life is only interrupted by the thrill of spotting one of Earth's most majestic creatures, along with herons, spotted deer, monkeys and crocodiles.

For those short on time or money, a day trip to the Sundarbans can be organised from the busy Bangladeshi river port of Mongla. From there, travellers can reach Karamjal Forest Station or Harbaria Wildlife Sanctuary, with elevated walkways and viewing platforms for a taste of the wild.


Mahabodhi Temple marks the spot where Buddha found enlightenment, after seven weeks of meditation under a Bodhi tree

Angkor temples

Cambodia's temples at the former Khmer capital are a living, breathing wonder of the world

For centuries, a masterpiece of power and prestige lay hidden within the jungle overgrowth of Siem Reap. Stretching over 400 square kilometres (154 square miles), the Angkor complex of temples remains a testament to the ingenuity, philosophy and wealth of the fallen Khmer Empire.

One of the largest active archaeological sites in the world, the laterite temples of Angkor form an elaborate complex, founded by early-12th-century king Suryavarman II, in dedication to Hindu deity Vishnu. Though the empire later converted to Buddhism, the temples continue to play a ritualistic role in the lives of local Khmer people, its chambers and squares filled with orange-robed monks and nuns in white.

Traditional Khmer temples were built in two styles: the 'temple mountain' and the 'galleried-temple'. The most renowned, Angkor Wat, featured both. The largest religious monument in the world, it took hundreds of thousands of workers (including labourers, masons, sculptors and servants, plus 6,000 elephants) more than three decades to build.

Grey and yellowish-brown sandstone bricks were most likely hauled over canals from quarries 35 kilometres (22 miles) away. These were encased around the laterite stone galleries, and carved with intricate bas-reliefs, depicting Hindu narratives – most famously the Churning of the Ocean of Milk creation story.

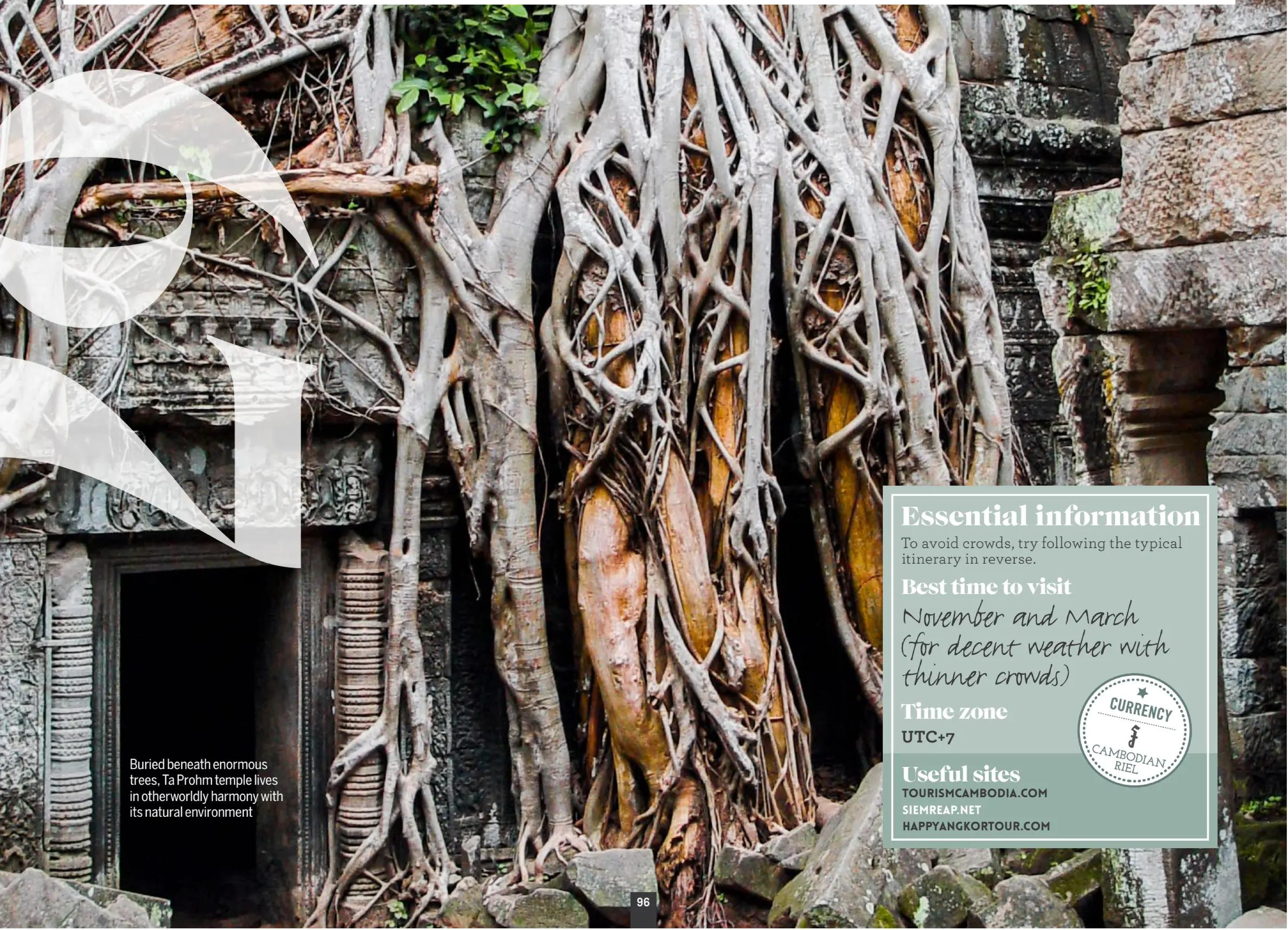
Surrounded by a 4.8-kilometre (three-mile) moat, with a long causeway, the temple was designed to mirror the five peaks of the sacred Mount Meru, with the tallest tower rising 213 metres (699 feet) high. Beneath, the temple houses a series of galleries, chambers, porches and courtyards, spread across different levels.

The complex is a microcosm of the universe, with Mount Meru at the centre – the walls the bounds of Earth and the moat, outer space. This theme binds Angkor Wat to its neighbouring temples, through solar alignments. The nearby complex of Angkor Thom was built as a 'Great City', the last Khmer capital, by the great conqueror, King Jayavarman VII. Housing royals, priests, officials and dancers, at its heart was the temple of Bayon – an *Indiana Jones*-style labyrinthine monument, covered in 2,000 faces likened to the bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, and the king himself – a Mahayana Buddhist.

The city is also home to a number of other monuments, from the Terrace of the Leper King and Terrace of the Elephants, to the overgrown Tep Pranam and Preah Palilay temples.

East of Angkor Thom, the temple of Ta Prohm (known casually known as 'Tomb Raider Temple') forms a unique bond with its natural surroundings. In places it is consumed by fig, banyan and kapok trees, growing atop walls, with thick roots spilling down into the earth below. Ta Prohm was built as a monastery and university, and – like Jayarvarman's other monuments – its Buddhist iconography has been converted back to Hindu symbolism.

Amidst the region's many other surviving ruins, the temple mountain of Phnom Bakheng, originally built in the late 9th century, is uniquely situated atop a hill. The stepped pyramid, adorned with lions, mirrors Mount Meru – its summit making for a stunning place to watch the sunset over the Khmer city of wonders.



Buried beneath enormous trees, Ta Prohm temple lives in otherworldly harmony with its natural environment

Essential information

To avoid crowds, try following the typical itinerary in reverse.

Best time to visit

November and March (for decent weather with thinner crowds)

Time zone

UTC+7

CURRENCY
៛
CAMBODIAN RIEL

Useful sites

TOURISMCAMBODIA.COM
SIEMREAP.NET
HAPPYANGKORTOUR.COM

Essential information

Those hoping to visit Kerala's wildlife sanctuaries should book in advance with the Kerala Forest Department.

Best time to visit

December to February (for cool, dry weather) or June to August (for monsoon Ayurveda treatment programmes)

CURRENCY

₹ INDIAN RUPEE

Time zone

UTC+5:30

Useful sites

KERALATOURISM.ORG/AYURVEDA-CENTRES
FOREST.KERALA.GOV.IN
HIGHRANGESPICEGARDENHOMESTAY.COM

Kerala's network of rivers, canals and backwaters is home to a vast array of wildlife

Kerala

68

India's water-drenched southwestern state of Kerala is a feast of natural beauty and culture

Fog and clouds intersperse with jungle, the sun melting over the distant horizon, to a tune of insects and swishing water. When speaking of their home state, Keralans' eyes often light up and one word springs to mind: beautiful. Stretching 580 kilometres (360 miles) along India's southwestern coast towards the Arabian Sea, its highlands slope down from the Western Ghats into the valleys and hills of the midlands – all connected by a network of 44 rivers and their offshoot canals and backwaters.

Kerala's demographic diversity is on full show at Kochi, a historic trading port, welcoming Arab and Chinese merchant alike – later joined by the British, Dutch and Portuguese. Modern Kochi is a fascinating mishmash of colonial churches, synagogues and mosques, the oldest European fort in India, Chinese fishing nets drooping over the coast, and palaces showcasing Indian prestige and wealth.

Further south, the coastal hamlet of Varkala prides itself on its beach – where a natural spring, (believed to have healing qualities) offers relief to weary wanderers. The area is a hub of traditional Ayurvedic medicine, with retreats and resorts offering the uninitiated holistic physical, mental and spiritual relief. Sat atop the cliffs is the 13th-century Janardana Swamy Temple, joined by the nearby Sivagiri Mutt – an annual pilgrimage site for followers of the social and religious reformer Sree Narayana Guru.

The Keralan backwaters run parallel to the coastline, bleeding a laid-back lifeline into the state. One renowned beneficiary, Alappuzha, is often called the 'Venice of the East' and serves as a port for backwater adventures, boat races and local maritime and coconut industries. While the city centre is hectic, its outlying waters offer a serene meditation on the state's natural splendour. Here, visitors embark on cruises, aboard modernised kettuvallam houseboats, with thatched roofs and wooden hulls – traditionally used to carry rice and spices.

Just down the backwater is Kumarakom, a village spread over numerous small islands within Vembanad Lake's mangroves and paddy fields, watched over by tall coconut trees. Home to a 5.7-hectare (14-acre) bird sanctuary, from Siberian storks to herons and cuckoos to waterfowls, its colourful array of avian ambassadors have birdwatchers clutching at their binoculars.

Deep in the state's wild forests, animals are the main attraction. Thekkady's Periyar Tiger Reserve covers 777 square kilometres (300 square miles), and is a tribute to nature at its wildest, with rich forests boasting almost 2,000 flowering plants. Though famous for its tiger population, the park is also home to more than 60 species of mammal, 265 types of bird and numerous reptiles and fish. Rivers and streams weave throughout, feeding its man-made lake. Boat trips take you amidst the overgrowth, past elephants, bison, leopards, snakes and frogs.

The area also hosts a variety of cardamom, pepper and coffee plantations. At Connemara Tea Factory, visitors can learn more about tea production and taste some of the region's finest brews. Meanwhile, the organic Highrange Spice Garden also doubles as a quaint homestay, tucked amidst the verdant magnificence of south India's favourite national park.

Himalayas

Stretching from Pakistan to Tibet, the Himalayas are Earth's mountainous masterpiece

Earth's crowning glory, the Himalayas are a formidable, ever-changing monument to Mother Nature. For soul seekers and the vertically inclined, the 2,400-kilometre (1,500-mile) crescent – stretching from Pakistan, across India, Bhutan and Nepal until reaching Tibet – represents both the spirit of adventure and the adventure of spirituality.

The region boasts some of the greatest geodiversity on the planet: the highest mountain and the deepest ravine, wild rhododendron forest and high-altitude desert. But it's no wilderness. More than 53 million people call this massif home; a vibrant patchwork of cultures and communities, threaded together by ancient pilgrimage and trading routes.

Since Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary conquered Everest in 1953, the world's highest peak has remained the jewel in the Himalayan crown. While it welcomes 600 summit attempts each year, 1,314 kilometres (817 miles) away in the western reaches of Pakistan, K2 – the world's second-highest mountain – often goes years without a single attempt.

Considered the last frontier, first summited in 1954, K2 remains largely unconquerable. Mythical but deadly, one in four who attempt it perish. And while it's the preserve of the world's most elite climbers, its trail to base camp hovers within the grasp of mere mortals. The journey begins in Askole, the last village in the Braldu Valley, passing Masherbrum and the Trango Towers, before Concordia unveils itself.

While only the hardiest of hikers are drawn to Pakistan's remote corners, the Nepalese Himalayas maintain a delicate balance of comfort and adventure. High mountain paths follow ancient trails, lined with spinning prayer wheels. On clear days, the craggy, snow-blanketed Everest obliges, providing a jaw-dropping backdrop – particularly when the huge tangerine sun announces dusk and dawn. Away from the popular trails of Everest and Annapurna, the 17-day Manaslu teahouse circuit rolls out of the jungle across suspension bridges and terraced fields, following the ancient salt trading route.

For adventurous souls willing to brave rough roads and high altitudes, the tiny kingdom of Mustang beckons. Closed to the world until 1992, it remains somewhat untouched by modern mode – a land of crumbling fortresses, neglected gods and lunar landscapes. There's a humble majesty to this long-forgotten realm, where, for a fortunate few, no-longer princes still welcome visitors into their private homes. Elsewhere lies one of Earth's greatest archaeological mysteries: the man-made Mustang Caves. Sculptures, paintings and preserved bodies, at least 2,000 years old, dot the 10,000-chamber complex.

From long-forgotten empires to the last-surviving Himalayan kingdom, Bhutan is an otherworldly time capsule; the country's national identity and traditional values remain steadfast, as it carefully embraces newfound modernity. With more than 155 temples and monasteries, dating back to the 14th century, the Paro Valley is a poignant starting point. The iconic Taktsang Monastery, known as the Tiger's Nest, clings to a sheer cliff face, floating 900 metres (3,000 feet) above a carpet of oak forest. A steep two-hour climb, up stairs hewn from rock, culminates in a sudden burst of colour. Prayer flags adorn every surface, and nooks are crammed with tsa-tsas, miniature shrines made by monks from the ashes of the dead.

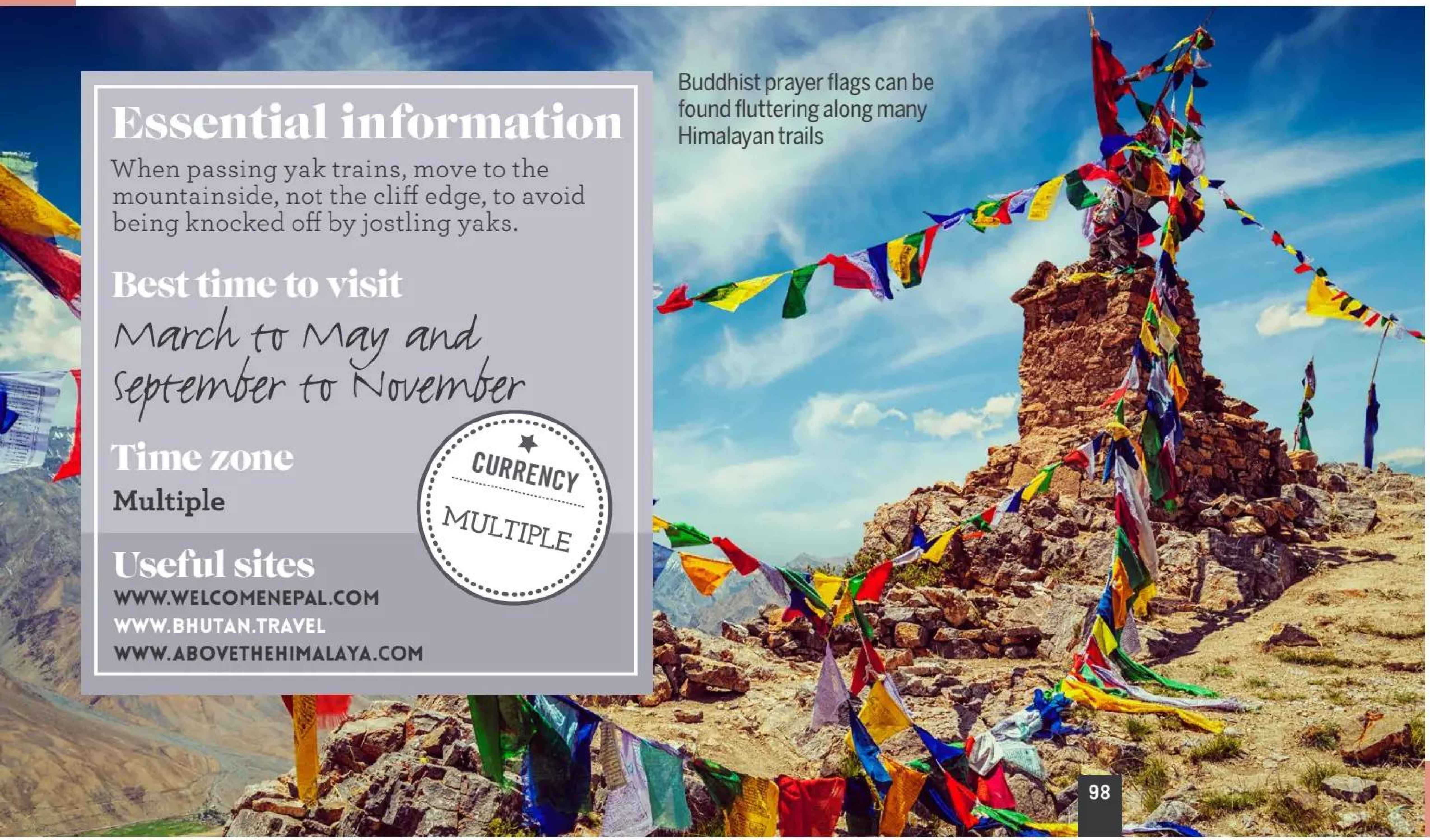
> THE WORLD'S HIGHEST PEAK REMAINS THE JEWEL IN THE HIMALAYAN CROWN

The Everest Base Camp trek passes the famous Ama Dablam Mountain, one of the world's most alluring peaks

EVEREST BASE CAMP

While Everest continues to lure climbers to its icy summit, the base camp trek is an achievable alternative for those keen to experience the world's highest peak. The 14-day trail rises to 5,380 metres (17,651 feet), weaving past chalk-white stupas, rushing rapids and across suspension bridges, before reaching the Sherpa town of Namche Bazaar for acclimatisation. The trail continues to Tengboche, home to one of the region's most beautiful monasteries, and past Dingboche before snaking through Lobuche, Gorak Shep and onto base camp. The iconic route presents grand views of the world's tallest mountain and its neighbours, Lhotse and Nuptse, bathed in pink rays of light, every evening.

Those wishing to follow in the footsteps of the 1953 British expedition can take an alternative trail from Jiri, in the beautiful Solukhumbu region. For those unable to hike, the North Base Camp in Tibet can be reached by car (bar a short stroll) and offers unbeatable Everest panoramas.



Buddhist prayer flags can be found fluttering along many Himalayan trails

Essential information

When passing yak trains, move to the mountainside, not the cliff edge, to avoid being knocked off by jostling yaks.

Best time to visit

March to May and September to November

Time zone

Multiple

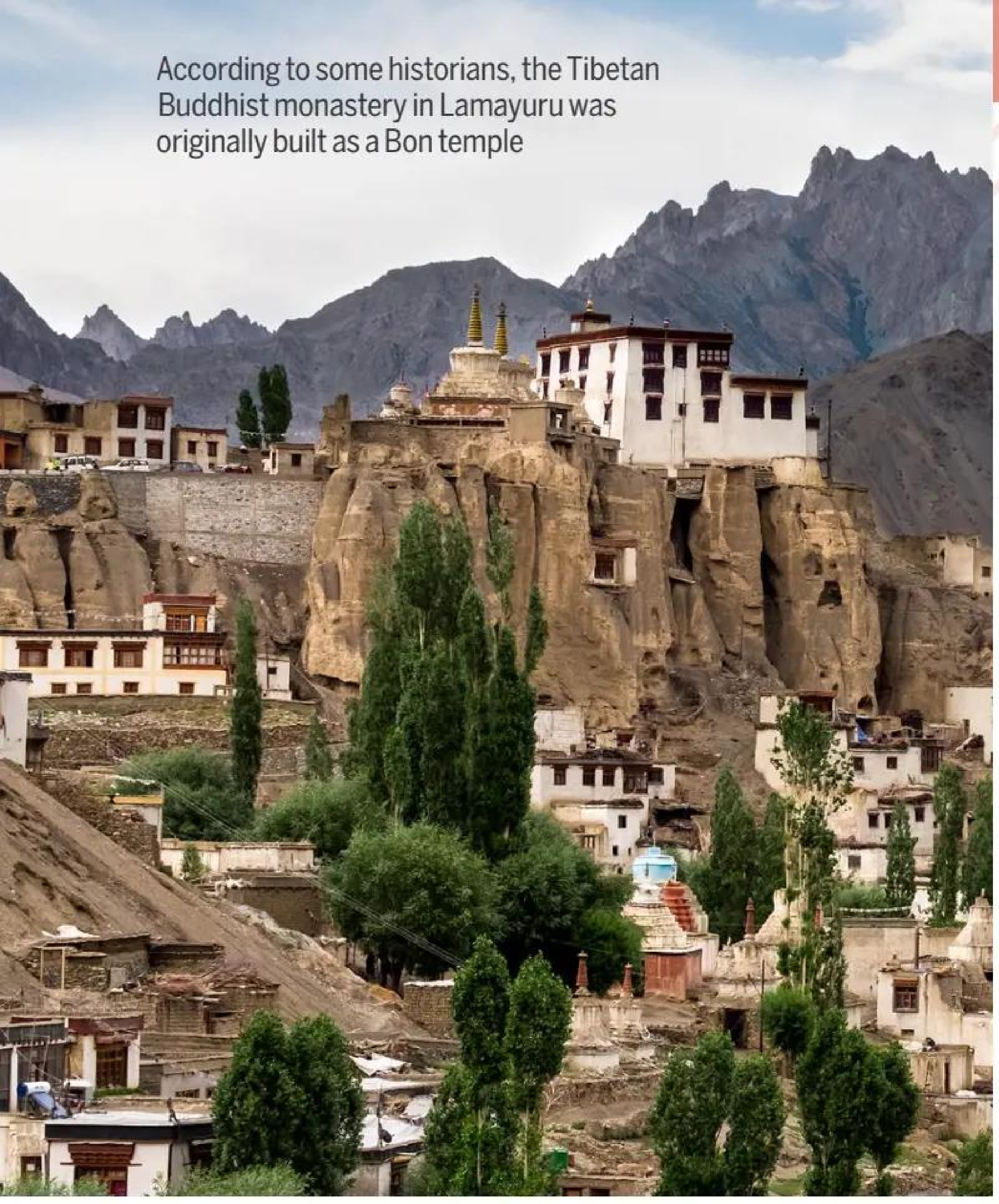
CURRENCY

MULTIPLE

Useful sites

WWW.WELCOMENEPAL.COM
WWW.BHUTAN.TRAVEL
WWW.ABOVETHEHIMALAYA.COM

The more challenging of the two popular K2 base camp descents requires mountaineering skill, but offers up amazing views in return



According to some historians, the Tibetan Buddhist monastery in Lamayuru was originally built as a Bon temple

Taktsang Monastery was built in 1692 near a cave where the guru Padmasambhava, who introduced Buddhism to Bhutan, was said to have meditated

A change of pace awaits in Tibet, where the country's charm lies as much in its quiet resilience as its scenery. The multi-storey monasteries of Lhasa still vibrate with murmured mantras, a testament to the population's unshakable belief. Meanwhile, the red and gold Potala Palace, the highest in the world, is not only an architectural marvel but the former residence of the Dalai Lama – with one thousand rooms linked by butter-lamp-lined corridors. Today, it houses the magnificent tombs of eight Dalai Lamas, alongside gilded statues and hand-painted Buddhist scrolls.

Further afield, in the wilds of western Tibet, the pyramidal Mount Kailash rises from the Barkha plain. One of the most mystical sites in Asia, it is a holy cynosure of four religions: Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism and Bon – the shamanistic religion of indigenous Tibetans.

For hardy travellers willing to break further into the isolated badlands of the country's far west, a lost kingdom awaits at Tsaparang. Ruined residences and Kashmiri-influenced art, including sculptures depicting cosmic visions, lead to a muralled underground palace, hidden deep in the eroded desert gorge. From the outside, it looks like any other mountain, its wondrous innards betrayed only by a small sculpture, offering a hint of the magnificence within.

Hemmed between supernatural mountains and perilously high passes, India's Ladakh, or Little Tibet, unfolds in a dizzying display of spectacularly jagged peaks and bottomless valleys, brought alive by turquoise and emerald high-altitude lakes. Home to both Tibetan Buddhists and Kashmiri Muslims, Ladakh is a melange of mud-brick dwellings, mosques and Buddhist treasures.

The ancient monasteries of Lamayuru, Thikse and Alchi, filled with red-robed monks, spill over rocky peaks. Sun-faded flags flap over painted murals and white-washed stupas, while prayer wheels, stamped with the mantra 'Om mani padme hum', beg to be spun three times – granting safe passage through the most treacherous, and wonderful, of Earth's creations: the mighty Himalayas.

The Annapurna Circuit winds harmoniously through both Hindu holy sites and Buddhist villages

ANNAPURNA CIRCUIT

Travellers have been singing the praises of the 206-kilometre (128-mile) long Annapurna Circuit for decades. While there are certainly more challenging and remote treks to be had, the trail remains the most captivating, thanks to its route around the heaven-piercing Annapurna range. Most circuits begin at Besisahar, run anticlockwise and include a one-hour detour to Poon Hill, one of Nepal's most famous viewpoints. Trekkers arrive via Ghorepani village in time for a spectacular sunrise over Annapurna and Dhaulagiri.

Weaving through almost every ecosystem Nepal has to offer – banana tree jungles, paddy fields, alpine ridges and semi-desert – the trail twists and turns until the Himalayas begin to reveal themselves in tantalising morsels. Propelling hikers into a mouth of granite and limestone fangs, the climax of the trail is the 5,416-metre (451-foot) tall Thorong La Pass, the circuit's highest point. A road now runs through the circuit, but it carries relatively little traffic, and those in search of heightened solitude can take alternative routes across some sections.

72 Grand Canyon
page 102
-
73 Monteverde
page 104
-
74 Denali National Park
page 105
-
75 Hawaii
page 106
-
76 Atacama Desert
page 108
-
77 Bay Islands
page 109
-
78 New York City
page 110
-
79 Caribbean
page 112
-
80 Fernando de Noronha
page 116
-
81 Banff National Park
page 117
-

THE AM

82 Los Angeles
page 118
-
83 Yosemite National Park
page 119
-
84 Hollywood
page 119
-
85 Ometepe
page 120
-
86 Cancún
page 121
-
87 Machu Picchu
page 122
-
88 Easter Island
page 123
-
89 Florida
page 124
-
90 Disney World
page 125
-

389
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CANADA
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ERICAS

Grand Canyon

Marvel at the beauty of this natural slice through southwest USA

Surprisingly, the Grand Canyon doesn't set many records. It isn't the longest, nor the widest, not even the deepest. However, it is by far the most famous, so much so that many people simply call it The Canyon as though there were no others in the world.

Multicoloured layers of rock sink into the earth, forming a chasm that gives the impression it must have been created by tectonic plates tearing apart. However, this slice through the United States was created over several million years – geologists still argue exactly how long ago – when the Colorado River meandered across what is now north Arizona. Erosion from the flowing water combined with the uplift of the Colorado Plateau to carve a mile-deep canyon. The rocks that are left behind were once covered by the waters of a warm, shallow sea or swampland, but now shimmer under the sun in a hot, dry desert.

For those interested in the statistics, the Grand Canyon stretches for 446 kilometres (277 miles), reaches 29 kilometres (18 miles) at its widest and measures 1,857 metres (6,093 feet) at its deepest. Nobody will ever see the whole thing in one visit, but it is possible to take in the majesty and grandeur in a day or two.

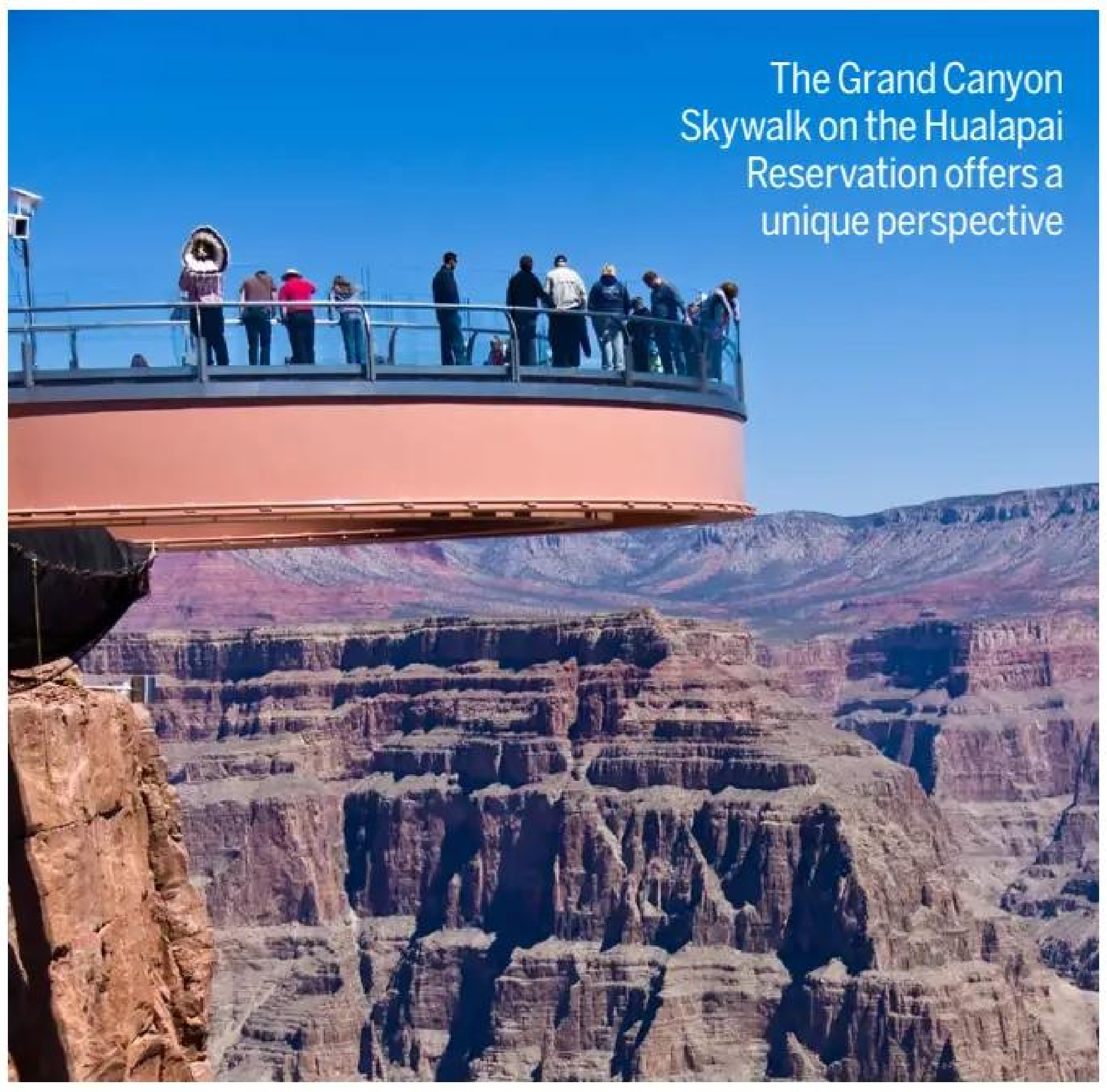
The popular sites of the South Rim may be busy, but they draw the crowds for a reason. Grand Canyon Village, with a number of wooden buildings dating to the turn of the 20th century, gives a glimpse of canyon country in the final days of the American Frontier. From here, Hermit Road runs west for 11 kilometres (eight miles) to the stone-built Hermit's Rest. Those who are keen to hike a portion of the Canyon will find this the easiest way to get their boots dusty: jump on board the free shuttle bus to Hermit's Rest and walk back to Grand Canyon Village along the Rim Trail. For those who prefer to see their natural wonders from the comfort of a seat, hop on and off the buses to your heart's content at the designated stops and viewpoints.

The quieter Desert View Drive, heading east from Grand Canyon Village, is the best way to escape the tourist hordes. This 40-kilometre (25-mile) road does not have a shuttle bus service so relies on visitors having their own wheels, but it includes six viewpoints and five unmarked pullover points. Don't miss Navajo Point and Lipan Point, two places where the dusky red layers of rock can be seen at their best. The road ends at the Desert View Watchtower, just beyond the stunning Tusayan Ruins. These are the eerie remains of a Puebloan village, first constructed nearly 1,000 years ago by around 20 Native Americans who called this land home.

Coachloads of tourists go no further than the viewpoints of the South Rim, but it's difficult to look down the steep walls of the Grand Canyon and not wonder what is down there. Bright Angel Trail, beginning in Grand Canyon Village, drops 1,340 metres (4,380 feet) over 13 kilometres (eight miles) to the banks of the Colorado River at the bottom of the cliffs. Given the nature of the descent, expect seemingly endless switchbacks and aching knees, although at least it's only another three kilometres (two miles) to the comfortable beds at Phantom Ranch, the only lodge beyond the rim.

> THE NORTH RIM IS THE IDEAL PLACE TO SEEK SANCTUARY FROM THE CROWDS

The Desert View Watchtower is one of the best places to escape the crowds on South Rim



The Grand Canyon Skywalk on the Hualapai Reservation offers a unique perspective

The multicoloured layers of the Grand Canyon rock strata plunge downwards for over 1.6km (1mi)

Only 16 kilometres (ten miles) from Grand Canyon Village as the crow flies, but a five-hour drive around the gorge, North Rim is the quieter side of Grand Canyon with only ten per cent of the park's visitors venturing across. It makes it the ideal place to seek sanctuary from the crowds. The north is also the colder side since it is around 300 metres (1,000 feet) higher than the South Rim. While those on the North Rim can be stood in falling snow, others far below might be sunbathing along the river bank.

It is now 150 years since John Wesley Powell led the first expedition through Grand Canyon in 1869 to explore an unknown section on American maps. Those who want to follow the trailblazing path of the pioneers should join one of the waterborne excursions leaving Lee's Ferry in the summer months. Itineraries range from a few days to a few weeks, and you can experience the Colorado River by whitewater rafting through rapids, peaceful paddling up little-known side canyons, and exploring Native American ruins only accessible by river.

But perhaps the best way to really appreciate the scale of the Grand Canyon is from the air. Scenic flights by helicopter and aeroplane leave from Grand Canyon Airport on South Rim, while others depart from Las Vegas, enabling visitors to Sin City to glimpse the Grand Canyon between trips to the gaming tables. Passengers who are lucky enough to find themselves on board are able to marvel at the sheer immensity of the gorge, carved by the seemingly peaceful ribbon of river within it.

The Colorado River carved the steep cliffs of the Grand Canyon over millions of years

To limit noise and ensure passenger safety, the National Park Service limits the number of flights and no longer allows them to dip below the rim. However, some helicopter excursions do land within the Canyon on the Havasupai and Hualapai Reservations, located outside National Park jurisdiction.

The Havasupai portion of the Canyon is home to the spectacular waterfalls of Havasu Creek, a tributary of the Colorado. For sheer beauty, this is one of the finest places in the region. The star attraction of the Hualapai Reservation is the Grand Canyon Skywalk, a glass-bottomed, horseshoe-shaped walkway that extends 21 metres (70 feet) over the rim. It may not be a comfortable experience for those who are afraid of heights, but the makers claim it will hold the weight of 70 Boeing 747 aeroplanes. Although if the glass did smash, expect a long fall – all those jets could all sit on top of each other and still not reach the rim, such is the depth of the most famous canyon in the world.

RIM TO RIM

It's possible to take a number of different rim-to-rim hikes across the Grand Canyon, although it is not recommended to try it in a single day. Probably the best option is the 39-kilometre (24-mile) route along the Bright Angel and North Kaibab trails from Grand Canyon Village on South Rim to Grand Canyon Lodge on North Rim. The walk is breathtaking in every sense, but worth it. Alternatively, try the shorter (but still challenging) South Rim to South Rim trek along the South Kaibab trail to the river and back up along the Bright Angel.

Whichever way you go, keep an eye out for the rare California condor soaring high on the thermals. However, beware the weather. Hikers who leave the clifftops in the cold light of an icy dawn may be wearing thick coats, only to find themselves sweltering in dangerously high temperatures when they reach the bottom of the Canyon.

Hiking trails run along the rims and down the steep sides of the Canyon

Essential information

Although South Rim is open all year round, be aware that North Rim closes during the winter months.

Best time to visit

May to October

Time zone

UTC-7

CURRENCY
$
US DOLLAR

Useful sites

NPS.GOV/GRCA
GRANDCANYON.COM
EXPLORETHECANYON.COM

73

Monteverde

At Costa Rica's misty 'green mountain' oasis, you'll feel as though you're on cloud nine

While Costa Rica may be known for its rich coffee, beautiful beaches and incredible wildlife, you haven't experienced the country's 'pura vida' (pure life and enjoyment) until you've visited Monteverde.

The word Monteverde translates as 'green mountain', a fitting name considering the lush-green cloud forests the town is known for. Located in the northwest of Costa Rica in the Cordillera de Tilaran mountain range, the area has three cloud forests, which offer an experience unlike any other.

The most famous of these is The Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve. Established in 1972, the reserve became popular with tourists after a 1983 *National Geographic* article dubbed it a mecca for bird lovers. It's now not only one of the most visited areas in Costa Rica, but one of the rarest habitats on Earth.

This tropical jungle paradise is a natural wonder. At 1,440 metres (4,662 feet) above sea level, there's a constant mist in the forest, which looks like clouds enveloping the towering treetops; it's simply spectacular. This unique microclimate and the humidity it creates is what makes this verdant forest flourish. One of the best things about Monteverde's cooling mist is that – unlike in most tropical forests – you won't suffer from the heat.

The area, which covers 14,200 hectares (35,089 acres), is made up of eight different biological zones and is home to five per cent of the world's biodiversity. This includes more than 2,500 plants (with 425 different orchids), 400 bird species, and more than 100 mammals. It's a wildlife paradise abundant with sloths, toucans, jaguars and monkeys. But the hidden gems to search for are the resplendent quetzal, one of the world's most beautiful birds, and the endemic rare golden toad.

The Cloud Forest Reserve is a three-hour drive from San José, and is a must for anyone visiting Costa Rica. Only three per cent of the forest is open to visitors, making it truly special. There are 13 kilometres (eight miles) of trails to explore with hanging bridges and hidden waterfalls leading you through the evergreen forest. It's worth going early in the morning if you're looking to spot some of its wild inhabitants or try a night walk for something completely different. A guide is also recommended if you want to maximise what you see and learn on your trip.

If you're an adventurer, you can view the scenery from a different perspective with an adrenaline boost. The forest is renowned for its canopy tours and ziplining. Fly through the air Superman-style on the 1,590-metre (5,216-foot) long zipline, the longest in Latin America, or fall for 45 metres (148 feet) on the Tarzan swing. If you can bear to open your eyes, it's breathtaking in more ways than one. For the less daring, the Sky Tram also offers stunning vistas.

If you're not a fan of crowds, the smaller Santa Elena Cloud Forest Reserve is less busy, although you won't see the quetzal here. And if you have time, the Children's Eternal Rainforest, which is six times as big, is also worth hiking.

A few kilometres away, the peaceful town of Santa Elena is the best place to visit to shop and try local Tico food. Foodies can take the Don Juan coffee plantation tour to discover how chocolate, sugar cane juice and coffee are made. If you haven't had enough adventure, there's horseback riding or canyoning and plenty more to keep you entertained.

Whether you're an adventurer, a birdwatcher, a hiker or a foodie, a trip to Monteverde is sure to be true bliss.

Hanging bridges are one of the best ways to see the Cloud Forest

Essential information

Don't book tours ahead of time. Instead, save money and travel to Monteverde by public bus.

Best time to visit

December to April

Time zone

UTC-6

CURRENCY
₡
COSTA RICAN COLÓN

Useful sites

THEBUSSCHEDULE.COM
DONJUANCR.COM/MONTEVERDE/OUR-TOURS
SELVATURA.COM

74

Denali – formerly named Mount McKinley – is the tallest mountain in North America

Denali National Park

Explore the rugged wilderness of the USA's cold north

The home of the tallest mountain in North America, Denali National Park – named after the 6,190-metre (20,310-foot) peak – is a semi-Arctic wilderness roughly the same size as the entire land area of Massachusetts. Visitors with keen eyes are likely to see grizzly bears, caribou and moose. Those with luck on their side might spot wolves, black bears and wolverines.

Considering its vast size, almost 20,000 square kilometres (7,700 square miles), Denali National Park contains only one road with a handful of destinations marked by mileposts. Private motorists can go as far as the Savage River Trailhead at mile 15 before being turned around, but most visitors stop at the Wilderness Access Center at the start of the road to buy a ticket for the buses that travel its full 146-kilometre (91-mile) length. Tour buses offer a guaranteed seat and a set itinerary, whereas shuttle buses will stop on request to set down and pick up passengers at the side of the road. Many of the shuttle-bus drivers are just as happy to share their love of the national park as their tour-bus equivalents, although prospective passengers may have to be patient until a bus with space aboard arrives.

All should aim to make it as far as Eielson Visitor Center at mile 66. This eight-hour round trip on the unpaved road might be tough on the buttocks, but it includes one of the most dramatic views of Denali. Even if the mountain is shrouded in cloud – a common occurrence during the summer months – it is a majestic sight. If the mountain is fully out, take full advantage and go crazy with your camera.

Photographers with stamina might like to extend their journey to mile 86 and Wonder Lake. A short distance away is Reflection Pond, possibly the best place to shoot images of the mountain when it peeks out from the mist. A little closer to home, at mile 46, is Polychrome Pass. This multicoloured bluff is particularly spectacular at dusk, and a dedicated shuttle bus departs the Visitor Center daily at around 5pm.

If the thought of a day on a bus seat doesn't appeal, why not step off the bus and into the wilderness? There are surprisingly few marked trails, so most hikers simply pick their own path. The sparse vegetation of the flat tundra and taiga forest makes it difficult to get lost, although those who choose to push further into the park may go for hours, even days, without seeing another person. There are campsites and lodges to rest at night, although be sure to book a spot at the Wilderness Access Center beforehand since spaces fill up quickly. Ensure you take plenty of supplies with you, as there are few services within the park itself.

Whether you choose off-road adventure in the backcountry or the comparative comfort of on-road travel, you'll be left with memories and photographs galore of the stunning scenery and wondrous wildlife of Denali National Park.

Essential information

Plan for an hour's wait for a shuttle bus with space available when needing a roadside pick up.

Best time to visit

May to September (to avoid road closures due to snow)

Time zone

UTC-9

Currency

$ US DOLLAR

Useful sites

NPS.GOV/DENA
RESERVEDENALI.COM
DENALIPARKVILLAGE.COM

Hawaii

Enjoy a warm welcome in the USA's Pacific Island paradise

Aloha. Not only is Hawaii's most famous word used as a greeting, it also means love and compassion. It's an apt expression, since most visitors fall in love at their first sight of the Aloha State.

Nearly every visitor will begin their Hawaiian adventure at the airport or cruise terminal of the state capital, Honolulu. This city of one million is the urban heart of Hawaii; seven times bigger than the next largest town with some three-quarters of resident Hawaiians calling it home. Here you'll immediately spot a sea of Hawaiian shirts, the colourful clothing that has become the region's most famous export. Tourist shops have gaudy prints in abundance to make wearers look like a modern-day John Candy or Magnum PI, but most resident Hawaiians choose a more restrained version in which the design is printed on the inside of the fabric to create a more muted look.

On the western fringes of Honolulu is Pearl Harbor, the US naval base that was seared into history on 7 December 1941, "a date that will live in infamy," according to then-president Franklin Roosevelt. A surprise Japanese attack damaged all eight battleships anchored in the harbour and sank eight other ships. Countless ground installations and buildings were destroyed, and nearly 2,500 Americans were killed. All this before their country had even declared war.

Nearly eight decades on, the centrepiece of Pearl Harbor is the USS Arizona Memorial, a pontoon building that floats above the wreck of the only battleship not to be raised after the attack. Accessed by boat from the harbourside, the memorial is a moving tribute. A marble wall listing the names of the 1,177 victims who lost their lives when the ship sank, an opening in the floor overlooks the water above the ship's decks. Occasional oil slicks – often referred to as the "tears of the Arizona" – are a poignant reminder that the USS Arizona still sits just a few metres below the surface, the last resting place of more than 1,100 servicemen whose bodies have never been recovered.

In 1999, USS Missouri – the vessel on which a Japanese delegation surrendered in 1945 – was moved to Pearl Harbor and berthed close to the Arizona memorial, meaning that the start and end of American involvement in World War II are commemorated in one place. Visitors are able to tour the Missouri, and also USS Bowfin, a 1940s submarine. Ford Island, in the middle of the harbour, is home to the Pacific Aviation Museum and a collection of restored fighter planes. Plan to spend a full day here if you wish to do Pearl Harbor justice.

With the history visited, it's time to hit the beach. Conveniently, one of the best in the world is located just 19 kilometres (12 miles) away: Waikiki Beach. Within strolling distance of Downtown Honolulu, Waikiki is actually a series of eight distinct beaches of powder-soft white sand running for a couple of kilometres in front of the boardwalk, behind which sit an array of hotels, bars and restaurants. Most of the hotels offer a luau, a traditional feast encompassing a buffet, music, hula and other Polynesian entertainments. Burn off the calories with a spot

> THE TOWERING HILL OF DIAMOND HEAD IS A REMINDER OF HAWAII'S VOLCANIC ORIGIN

The sun, sea and surf at Waikiki Beach make it a busy place, although it is usually possible to find a stretch of unclaimed sand

Essential information

Ticket prices for different luau vary widely, so ask around before you buy.

Best time to visit

All year round due to relatively stable weather

Time zone

UTC-10

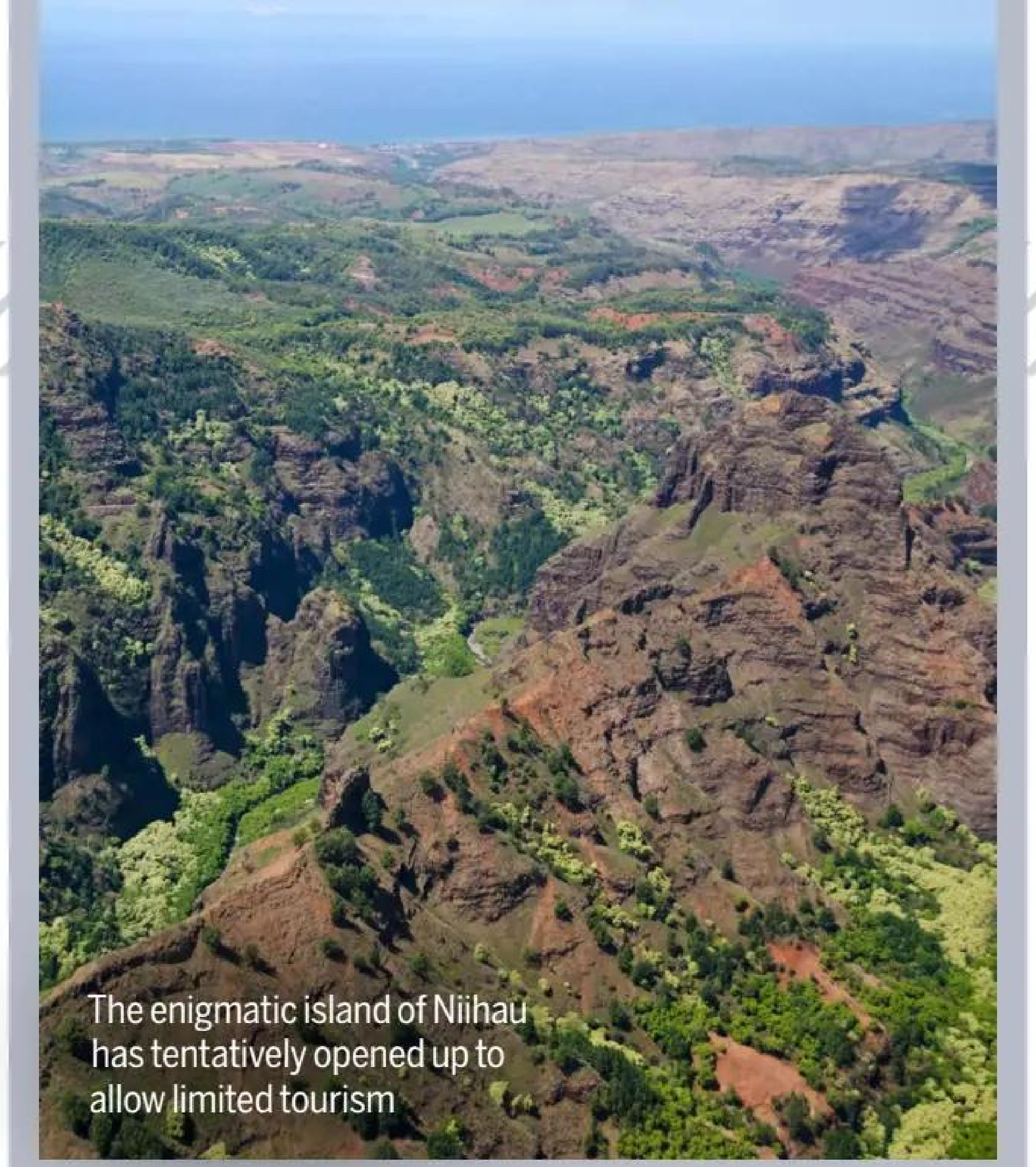
CURRENCY

$ US DOLLAR

Useful sites

GOHAWAII.COM
GOVISITHAWAII.COM
HAWAII.COM

Hawaii's Kilauea caldera is one of the most active volcanoes in the world


The enigmatic island of Niihau has tentatively opened up to allow limited tourism

of snorkelling at Fort DeRussy Beach, where a coral reef sits just beyond the waves, or take a surfing lesson at Kuhio Beach.

Most postcards of Waikiki Beach feature the sand in the foreground and Diamond Head in the background. This towering hill is a reminder of Hawaii's volcanic origins. Diamond Head is an extinct crater, and it's a tough climb up the solidified lava with plenty of steps. It's best left to those with strong legs and a head for heights, but the view across Honolulu and the Pacific for those who do reach the summit makes the burning thighs worthwhile.

Those who venture away from busy Honolulu and Oahu find that the pace of life is slower, but natural wonders are just as impressive. On the island of Maui, rent a car and drive the road to Hana. This 80-kilometre (50-mile) stretch winds along the coast and can be done in a couple of hours, but it is best to take all day to admire the beaches and lush waterfalls that run downhill from Koolau Forest Reserve. Beyond Hana, the road surface is suitable only for off-road vehicles, but it does lead to the Oheo Gulch Pools. Canny tourist operators nicknamed these the Seven Sacred Pools, although they're not actually sacred and there are far more than seven. Still, don't let that stop you enjoying a dip in the clear waters, and swimming beneath the waterfalls that feed the pools.

The memorials and museums at Pearl Harbor draw history buffs from across the world

The island of Hawaii (Big Island to the locals) is, unsurprisingly, the largest in the archipelago. Hotfoot it to Hawaii Volcanoes National Park, the best place to explore the islands' fiery beginnings. Marvel at the steamy spectacle of Kilauea, one of the most active volcanoes in the world, by cruising the Crater Rim Drive. Then enjoy an unusual underground view of a volcano by walking through the Thurston Lava Tube, which was emptied of molten rock a few centuries ago. However, be aware that this is still an active volcanic zone, and roads are often closed due to lava flows and ongoing eruptions.

Those in search of further adventures can explore Waimea Canyon and the Na Pali Coast State Park on the garden isle of Kauai, the former leper colony on the friendly isle of Molokai, or the traditional culture of the pineapple isle of Molokai – once wholly owned by the Hawaiian Pineapple Company to grow the exotic fruit.

However, it's a mistake to cram too much in to a Hawaiian trip. Don't forget to leave to time do very little. With 1,210 kilometres (750 miles) of coastline, every island has a surplus of beaches to choose from. Soak up the year-round sun, sip a cocktail and enjoy the hospitality of Hawaii's famously friendly people. After all, this is the Aloha State, best enjoyed the aloha way.

FORBIDDEN ISLE

The westernmost of Hawaii's eight main islands, Niihau has remained stubbornly isolated from the tourist industry. Purchased from the Kingdom of Hawaii in 1864 by a Scottish widow whose descendents have fiercely protected the island from modernising influences, entry is barred to all but residents, their invited guests and a few military personnel. According to reports, there is no alcohol, no phone lines or internet, no cars and no indoor plumbing.

Yet Niihau is cautiously opening up to outsiders. Curious sightseers can now take an authorised helicopter tour from neighbouring Kauai, which circles the island and lands on an undeveloped beach, albeit well away from any residents or their dwellings. Boat tours also leave Kauai to anchor off Niihau for snorkelling and diving, but they too must maintain a discreet distance. For now, visitors must be satisfied with only a glimpse of the pristine and peaceful Forbidden Isle.

The beautiful and unique landscape of coastal Oahu and the Kualoa Ranch is where *Jurassic Park* was filmed

Moon Valley, or El Valle de la Luna, is named for its extraterrestrial landscapes

Essential information

Study a little basic Spanish before visiting.

Best time to visit

September to November (for pleasant weather, with fewer crowds)

Time zone

UTC-4

CURRENCY

$ CHILEAN PESO

Useful sites

NOIHOTELS.COM/HOTEL/NOI-CASA-ATACAMA
SORBAC.COM
SPACEOBS.COM

Atacama Desert

One of the driest places on Earth, Chile's Atacama Desert is an otherworldly experience

Chile's Atacama Desert is one of the most inhospitable places on the planet – a land where sand stretches into salt, volcanoes take their place alongside snow-capped mountains, and the wind and ghost towns are kept company by occasional lagoons.

At the centre of it all is San Pedro, the oasis settlement at the heart of the Atacama community, 11,000 years in the making. The locals mastered this brutal terrain, terracing the mountains, rearing llama and alpaca, and harvesting figs, pumpkins, corn and other produce. Today, San Pedro's narrow dirt streets are lined with adobe houses, restaurants, hotels and shops – a leaping-off point for ventures into the great beyond.

Nearby, the badlands mutate into a lunar landscape at the aptly named Moon Valley. Here, the great Andes and the Atacama desert – sculpted by the elements over millions of years – are kissed by the fading sun, bursting into colour 2,550 metres (8,366 feet) above sea level.

Further afield, at Death Valley, the desert earns its stripes, hurtling humongous dunes heavenward alongside restless mountains; rock upon rock upon sand. A brutal expanse rolled out towards the horizon, it also goes by the name Mars Valley, where many try their hands at sandboarding, mountain biking and trekking.

From space, the journey continues to hell, with the geyser fields of El Tatio – where steam rises from scorched earth – keeping the chubby viscachas (cousins of the chinchilla), camelid vicuñas and emu-like rheas at bay. The smoking wasteland is anything but, sprouting giant cacti and yaretas, which ooze like giant broccoli from the sand. Dialling back the intensity, the local hot springs boast mineral-rich waters, mud baths and mini-waterfalls.

Soon after, the earth unfolds into an open expanse of white ground, interspersed with thin pools reflecting the mountains in the distance. This is Salar de Atacama, the country's largest salt flat, home to numerous species of flamingo – and part of the Los Flamencos National Reserve. At 4,200 meters (13,780 feet) above sea level, this is serious headache territory, but nothing a float in the turquoise Cejar Lagoon can't fix.

At Rainbow Valley – a natural solarium, where the stars are laid bare by the lightless night – hills of red, green and yellow compete for glory. Scattered across the dry landscape are a handful of ruins from past Atacaman civilisations, such as the pre-Incan; hilltop Quitor Fort; and Lasana, a fortress built along the Loa River.

While the region's petroglyphs, or rock art, date back 10,000 years, among its more unlikely cultural treasures are its various ghost towns – left in the wake of the former saltpeter industry, which for 60 years drew workers from across Chile, Peru and Bolivia. The industry, spread over 200 works, sprouted its own Pampino culture, leaving behind empty, creaky and clanging towns, such as Humberstone, which has been converted into an open-air museum, centred around a restored (allegedly haunted) theatre.

Bay Islands

Some of the world's best diving awaits in the waters surrounding the Bay Islands of Honduras

77

The bright sunshine and the beautiful waters of the Bay Islands of Honduras beckon thousands of visitors annually to experience some of the world's finest diving and snorkelling. The barrier reefs surrounding Roatán, Guanaja and Utila include a portion of the world's second-largest such ecosystem. While lodging and dining expenses are somewhat higher than the Honduran mainland, visitors find that these are worth the investment to observe marine life on a grand scale, including abundant coral, fish, sponges, sea turtles and more. Once a part of the Spanish empire, the islands have been administered as one of 18 departments of the Republic of Honduras since 1872.

Lying 15 to 60 kilometres (ten to 40 miles) off the Honduran coast in the Caribbean Sea, the popularity of the islands has increased substantially in recent years, and Roatán has become a particularly popular destination.

The largest of the islands, Roatán offers all-inclusive resort packages along with guided diving excursions, hiking trails and beautiful beaches that invite visitors to relax and soak up the sun. Thrilling zip lines, encounters with jungle wildlife, and easy living are also abundant. The island is 60 kilometres (40 miles) long, and 14 kilometres (nine miles) across at its widest point. A long, curving ridgeline accents the tropical landscape, which challenges accomplished hikers but provides stunning vistas of the Caribbean for those willing to put in some legwork. Although hotel accommodation is sparse, good availability exists at West End Village, an eclectic enclave at the northwestern end of the island. Thriving commercial activity and shopping are also available at Coxen Hole, the largest city on Roatán.

Utila is the smallest of the three Bay Islands; however, there are opportunities to learn diving and snorkelling skills at a reasonable rate. In fact, for budget-minded travellers Utila may be the best place to discover the captivating natural beauty of the Caribbean barrier reef. Utila is punctuated with mangrove swamps, and its main road traversing the entire island from Sandy Bay in the west to The Point on the eastern shore may be walked in only 20 minutes. Its population centre, Utila Town, is home to shops and restaurants, providing a real flavour of the unique Caribbean culture that makes the Bay Islands such a popular destination.

The mountainous island of Guanaja receives fewer visitors. Consisting of two islets bisected by a canal, these spits of land are accessible from one another by water taxi. Bonacca, also called Guanaja Town, is the centre of the island's commerce. Shops offer a variety of local wares, and accommodation here – while relatively few – can be expensive.

The Bay Islands of Honduras present an appealing Caribbean adventure for visitors, beckoning those who seek beauty in nature, colourful culture and an opportunity to experience the easy lifestyle that has made the area famous the world over. Remember that expenses for food and lodging vary widely. Credit card transactions are also subject to a hefty 16 per cent upcharge in some locales.

Essential information

For those travelling by air, only Roatán's Juan Manuel Gálvez airport regularly receives international service.

Best time to visit

February to September (to avoid the rainy season)

Time zone

UTC-6

CURRENCY
L
HONDURAN LEMPIRA

Useful sites

HONDURASTRAVEL.COM
GO2ROATAN.COM
DIVEZONE.NET/DIVING/BAY-ISLANDS-HONDURAS

The blue waters of the Caribbean Sea and an expansive beach awaits visitors to West Bay on the island of Roatán

New York City

There's nowhere quite like New York, America's epicentre of culture and commerce

Welcome to the city that never sleeps. New York is a vast metropolis where anything can happen – one minute you're taking in the neon-lit commercial mecca of Times Square, the next you'll be sipping drinks in a trendy Brooklyn dive bar or strolling through acres of urban greenery in the iconic surrounds of Central Park.

However you choose to begin your New York City adventure, arriving into town via Grand Central Terminal will ensure a suitably splendid entrance. The aptly named station (it's both grand and central) houses elaborate architecture and artwork, providing its 700,000 daily commuters with an inspiring start and end to their journeys.

Manhattan is New York City how you imagine it. Most of the Big Apple's recognisable sites can be found here, including the Empire State Building. This towering landmark and its dazzling coloured lights can be enjoyed from the ground for free, but seeing the city from its 102nd floor observatory is an essential NYC experience.

From up here you can map out the city as the birds do, planning your route through its varied neighbourhoods while basking in the glow of a Manhattan sunset (it's the best time to visit, as you'll see the city transitioning from day to night). For the best view of the tower itself, try Top of the Rock at the Rockefeller Center, which is located directly opposite the Empire State Building and provides similarly spellbinding vistas of the city.

Continue to find your bearings with a walk along the High Line. What used to be an unsightly freight line through the Meatpacking District has become one of New York's most appealing urban spaces – a 2.4-kilometre (1.5-mile) stretch of green where you can take your time ambling across the city and admiring its sights from nine metres (30 feet) above the ground. Art installations, food vendors and some inspired landscaping make it easy to while away an afternoon enjoying views of the Hudson River.

When you're done with the razzle-dazzle of Manhattan, New York has four other boroughs to explore. Brooklyn is big enough to be its own city – accessible by foot via the stately Brooklyn Bridge – and it's where you'll find independent shops and bars in the hip neighbourhood of Williamsburg, kitsch coastal amusements in Coney Island, and verdant foliage in Brooklyn Botanic Garden.

Sports fans will want to spend some time in Queens and the Bronx, home to two of America's most legendary baseball teams. The Mets play at Citi Field in Queens, while the Yankees hit their home runs from Yankee Stadium in the Bronx. If you'd prefer to catch some fast-paced basketball, head to Madison Square Garden, where the Knicks shoot hoops.

Taking the free ferry to Staten Island means you'll catch sight of New York's most recognisable landmark. The Statue of Liberty holds her torch aloft from her pedestal on Liberty Island, which is visible from the boat. For a closer look, take a trip to the island and enjoy a self-guided audio tour to learn about the history of this remarkable monument. Book tickets in advance if you want to step inside the statue and see New York from Lady Liberty's crown.

Museums in New York provide a cultural antidote to the touristy hubbub of its most famous sights. Perhaps the most noteworthy of these is the Metropolitan Museum of Art (known as the Met for short). Countless significant artworks fill the walls and halls of this vast museum, with highlights including a

The High Line injects nature and colour into the urban heart of New York City

> STEP INSIDE THE STATUE AND SEE NEW YORK FROM LADY LIBERTY'S CROWN

New York's iconic yellow 'medallion' taxicabs charge by a meter based on the duration and distance of your journey

Central Park's abundant trees come to life with red, orange and yellow in autumn

CENTRAL PARK

Providing an escape from the bright lights and blaring horns of the big city, Central Park is a 341-hectare (843-acre) oasis that anyone can enjoy. There's no shortage of things to see and do here – whether you're checking out points of interest like Strawberry Fields and Belvedere Castle or kicking back in the expansive communal plains of Sheep Meadow, the park has served as a leisure space for New Yorkers ever since its creation in the 1850s.

Some of the best activities in Central Park include taking in the scenery during a horse-and-carriage ride, and visiting the 130+ species that reside in Central Park Zoo. Depending on when you visit, you might also be able to check out some of the seasonal events that take place in the park each year, such as music concerts in summer and ice skating in winter.

Manhattan's famous skyscrapers include the Empire State Building, the Chrysler Building and One World Trade Center

reconstruction of an Ancient Egyptian temple and priceless paintings from around the world. Its roof garden and bar provide the perfect place to relax between exhibitions, and contain sculptures by contemporary artists.

The Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) houses one of the world's best collections of work by artists including Vincent van Gogh, Andy Warhol, Jackson Pollock and Roy Lichtenstein. If you're still craving creative prowess after exploring its four levels, there's the Guggenheim; the building is a masterpiece in itself, an inverted-ziggurat structure designed by American architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

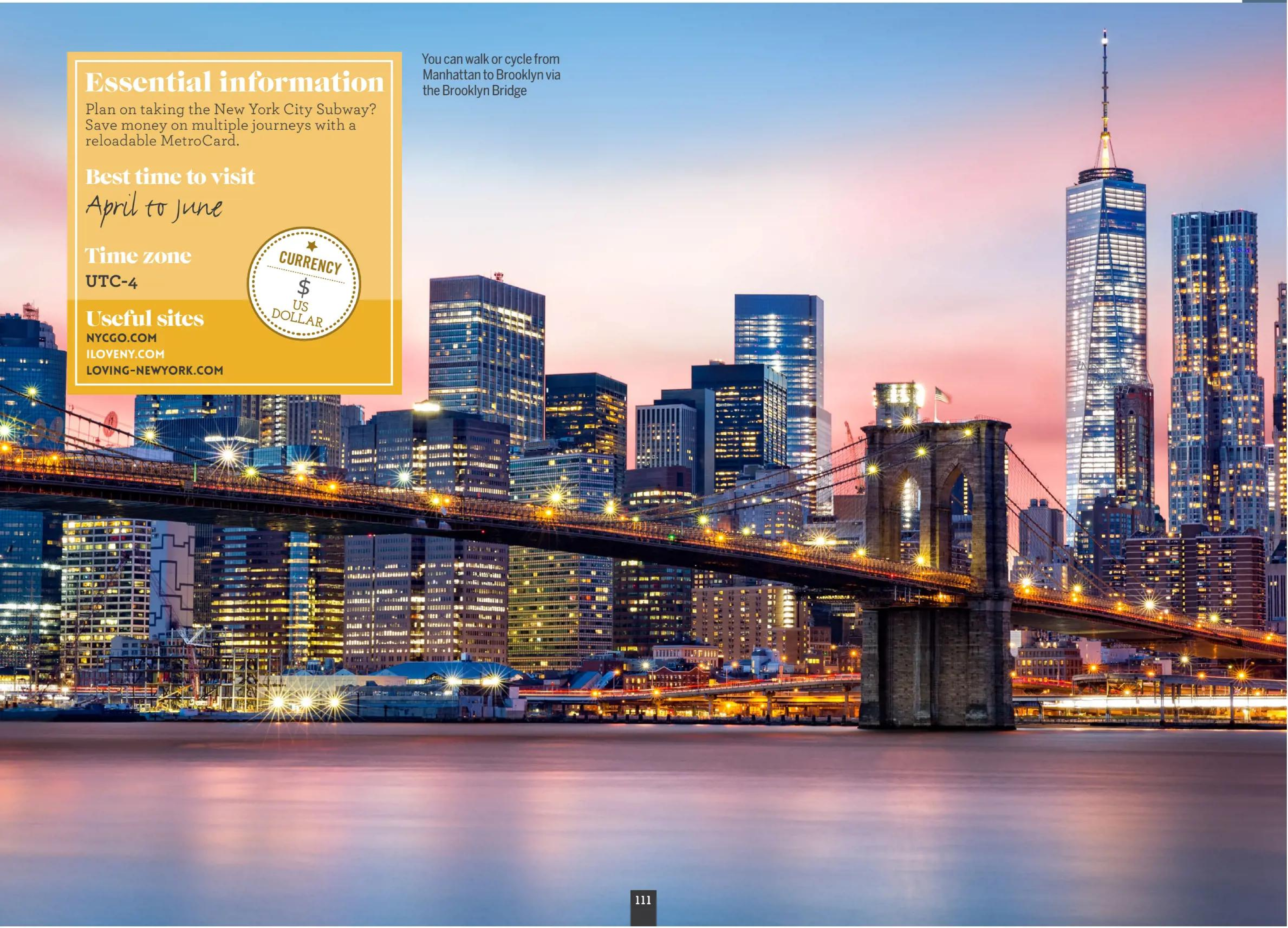
When you've filled your boots with art, the American Museum of Natural History showcases wonders of an entirely different kind. Kids and adults alike marvel at the feats of evolution inside this temple to Mother Nature, such as a 28.7-metre (94-foot) long blue whale suspended from the ceiling and more dinosaur skeletons than you can shake a prehistoric stick at.

A more sobering experience (but no less vital) is to visit the National September 11 Memorial & Museum. Here, a pair of square reflective pools surrounded by America's largest man-made waterfalls mark the precise location where the Twin Towers once stood. Around each pool's edge, the names of the 2,983 victims are inscribed into bronze parapets as a tribute to those who lost their lives.

You'll need to keep energy levels up with plenty of food while exploring New York's sprawling neighbourhoods. As luck would have it, this city is one of the best places in the world for eating. Whether you choose to dine in style at one of NYC's many Michelin-starred restaurants or keep it real with meals from street vendors, foodies will be in awe of the culinary variety that can be found here.

Pizza is something of a speciality in New York, and there's no shortage of quality outlets to grab a slice from. Some of the best include Grimaldi's in Brooklyn and Lombardi's in Little Italy. You'll also want to grab a bagel while you're in town; for this, try the smoked salmon and cream cheese number at Russ & Daughters. And what would breakfast in New York be without coffee? The city is awash with independent cafés – you'll barely walk two blocks without discovering one.

But you shouldn't confine yourself to purely local flavours during your stay in New York. There's a whole world of cuisine here, with more than 200 different nationalities calling the city home. Make the most of this global microcosm by sampling as many delicacies as possible, from steaming noodle bowls in Chinatown to mouthwatering pierogies in Little Poland.


You can walk or cycle from Manhattan to Brooklyn via the Brooklyn Bridge

Essential information

Plan on taking the New York City Subway? Save money on multiple journeys with a reloadable MetroCard.

Best time to visit

April to June

Time zone

UTC-4

CURRENCY
$
US DOLLAR

Useful sites

NYCGO.COM
ILOVENY.COM
LOVING-NEWYORK.COM

Essential information

When travelling in the Caribbean, it's a good idea to carry US dollars as well as the local currency.

Best time to visit

February to March (for the best weather)

Time zone

Multiple

CURRENCY

MULTIPLE

Useful sites

TRAVELANDLEISURE.COM/SLIDESHOWS/CARIBBEAN-ISLAND-GUIDE

CARIBBEAN.CO.UK

CARIBBEANTRAVEL.COM

Caribbean

More than 7,000 islands await you in this slice of sunny, sandy paradise

The Caribbean is known throughout the world as a gorgeous, idyllic destination for a luxurious holiday with guaranteed good weather, stunning beaches and all the rum you can sip. This is true for pretty much all of the countries in the group bordering the Caribbean Sea, but the islands have so much more to offer than beaches and piña coladas. Although obviously you'll want to make time to enjoy a few of those too while you're out there!

Many of the Caribbean countries' economies are geared towards the tourism trade, so there are plenty of hotels, watersports and tours on offer, providing a range of choices in where to stay, what to do and how to do it. However, if you're keen to discover the real, authentic Caribbean then you do have plenty of options as well on the less famous islands.

As a starting point on your Caribbean journey, you could do an awful lot worse than following in the footsteps of Christopher Columbus. When he set sail to attempt to discover a western sea route to Asia, he stumbled across The New World – first landing on San Salvador – part of The Bahamas. There is a statue on the island commemorating his arrival in 1492 as well as a white cross marking the spot where he first stepped foot in the country. The Bahamas may be significantly different from Columbus's time, but there are few better places to begin your Caribbean voyage. One essential stop is the unique and stunning Pink Sands Beach. This is exactly what its name suggests it is – a glorious 4.8-kilometre (three-mile) stretch of beach where the sand is less golden and more pink, due to the red shells of tiny marine organisms called foraminifera that reside in the reefs. This natural wonder simply has to be seen to be believed.

On the subject of reefs, the diving opportunities are plentiful around the Caribbean, but few places are as good as The Bahamas. The Andros Coral reef is the third-largest barrier reef in the world, and is teeming with exotic fish and beautiful, unspoiled coral. Tick something off the bucket list by swimming with dolphins in Dolphin Cay, or, if you fancy something a little more daring, sharks in Stuart Cove. The Bahamas is also home to the Lucayan National Park, which features the

The Caribbean has a wealth of beaches, with pale, golden sands and crystal-clear azure waters

Castaway Cay is an idyllic Caribbean island – complete with Disney characters and activities

COOKIE'S TO
HIDEOUT (TEENS ONLY)
PELICAN PLUNGE
SAND BAR
SPRING A LEAK
PELICAN POINT OVERLOOK

©Alamy

DISNEY ISLAND

It may be a surprise to learn that Disney owns an island in the Caribbean. Gorda Cay in The Bahamas was leased by Disney in 1997, and it was renamed Castaway Cay and turned into a Disney-themed private island exclusively for travellers on Disney's Cruise Line ships. It is a great family-fun location with family-oriented beaches, Disney characters in costume, and a huge range of games and activities. While it's geared towards families, there are adults-only beaches, bars and bicycles for hire.

Stopovers on Castaway Cay only last a few hours while the cruise liner is in port, so make sure you pack in as many cool Disney-based activities as possible. If you really want to impress your friends and family back home, you can even send a postcard from the island's post office, which will arrive with a special Castaway Cay postmark.

world's longest underwater cave system. In the capital, Nassau, you'll find a collection of colonial buildings, instantly transporting you back several centuries, while John Watling's distillery is well worth a tour – given that it is known as the 'spirit of The Bahamas'. Last, but certainly not least, is Big Major Cay, 132 kilometres (82 miles) southeast of Nassau. The name Big Major Cay may not be familiar to you, but you've almost certainly heard of Pig Beach. With its soft, golden sand and clear turquoise waters, it is stunning enough in its own right – but it separates itself from the myriad other idyllic beaches in the Caribbean by having around 20 pigs that love to splash in the shallows. No one quite knows how the pigs got there, but to swim with pigs in the crystal waters of The Bahamas is truly a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Jamaica is another of the Caribbean's most well-known islands, thanks in part to two iconic sporting disciplines. First is Olympic sprinting, second is the bobsleigh. A statue of multiple-Olympic-gold-medal-winning sprinter Usain Bolt can be found in the capital, Kingston, while his hometown of Sherwood Content is worth a visit as the locals are more than happy to discuss one of their country's most famous world stars. And anyone who has seen *Cool Runnings* is surely still in love with the Jamaican bobsleigh team. You can re-create their famous journey with a one-kilometre (0.6-mile) bobsled run that speeds through the Dunn River Falls. You should also take the time to visit the falls themselves – a travertine waterfall that you are able to climb if you're feeling adventurous, or relax in if you're feeling more chilled.

On the subject of chilling out, Jamaica is the home of reggae, and they sure are proud of it. Reggae music pours out of so many of the bars and restaurants on the island, but it's always fresh, always fun and matches perfectly with the pace of life out there. Bob Marley is one of the island's greatest exports, and you can visit the Bob Marley Museum in Kingston. One more Jamaican gift to the world is Blue Mountain coffee – so don't miss out on a cup or two of java straight from the source. Jamaica is a relaxed, serene island that is a great spot to relax in, so a trip to the Floyd's Pelican Bar is a must. This is a driftwood shack 1.25 kilometres (0.75 miles) out to sea, where you can eat, drink and relax to the sounds of the waves lapping against the wooden struts – an experience unlike any other in the world.

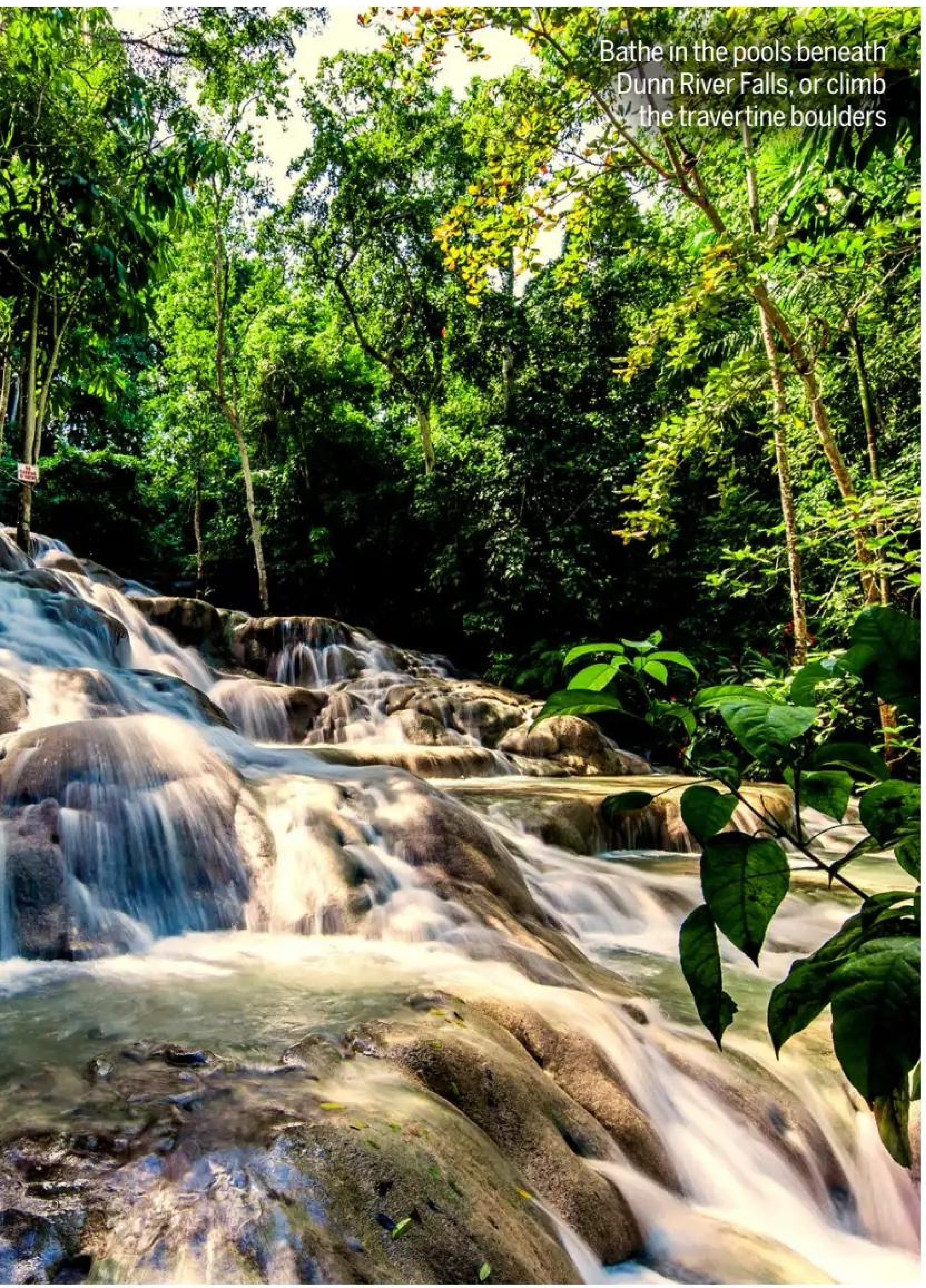
79

The network of caves throughout Barbados is a great place to see stalactites and stalagmites

> FOR BRITISH TRAVELLERS, BARBADOS IS SOMETHING OF A HOME FROM HOME

Barbados is yet another stunning island that your Caribbean trip wouldn't be complete without visiting. It's one of the smallest of the Caribbean countries, but packs an awful lot of character and history into its modest form. For British travellers, Barbados is something of a home from home – just with an awful lot more sunshine. The Queen is still head of state in Barbados, and her portrait sits proudly at the airport as you arrive. The post boxes in Barbados are bright red, and everything from the greens to the quaint churches just scream Little England.

Barbados is truly a nature-lover's paradise, as there is so much to see and do both inland and on the coast. Hunte's Garden is a highlight of the island – a wonderful botanical garden set in a gully, full of plants unique to the island. Anthony Hunte, the horticulturalist behind the design, is often available for a chat and drink, providing visitors with a superb insight into this attraction. The capital of Bridgetown is home to a true natural wonder: a huge baobab tree that is so wide it takes 15 people to surround it. The tree is over 1,000 years old so be sure to drink in the age and majesty of this ancient tree while you're in Bridgetown.



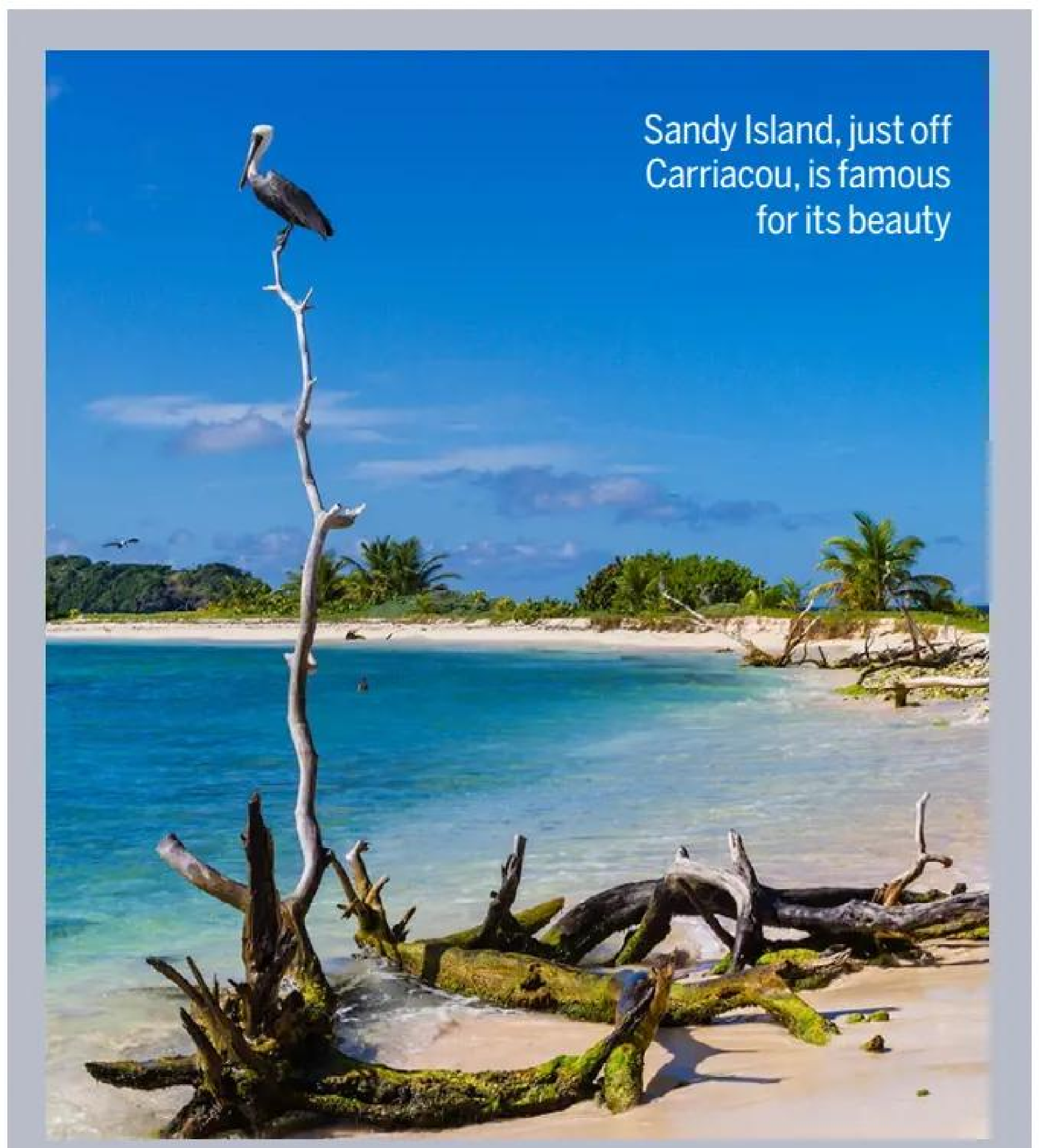
Bathe in the pools beneath Dunn River Falls, or climb the travertine boulders

Harrison's Cave is a fascinating excursion, as a train takes you through a network of caves and tunnels, where you can gaze in awe at the stalagmites and stalactites that line its ceiling and floor. A trip to the Mount Gay or Foursquare Distillery is also something that should be high up on your agenda, as the sugar plantations and story of how rum became the national drink of the Caribbean is interesting and enjoyable.

It's difficult to talk about Barbados without mentioning its spectacular cricketing heritage. Despite having one of the smaller populations of the countries that make up the West Indies cricket team, it has produced many of its stars, including Gordon Greenidge, Desmond Haynes, Sir Garfield Sobers and the famous Three Ws: Sir Clyde Walcott, Sir Everton Weekes and Sir Frank Worrell. The Kensington Oval is one of the most beautiful Test grounds in the world, and is an essential location on any self-respecting cricket fan's bucket list. Barbados truly is a gorgeous slice of Britishness thousands of miles away, so somewhere certainly worth considering if you like your home comforts.

Saint Lucia maybe isn't quite as well-known across the world as The Bahamas, Jamaica and Barbados, but it's certainly one of the most glorious of all the Caribbean islands. If you only have the time for one stop, then you simply have to head to Soufrière. It may be small but it's home to two of Saint Lucia's most famous landmarks: Sulphur Springs (the world's only drive-in volcano) and the Pitons. The Gros and Petit Pitons are the original twin peaks, rising 798 metres (2,619 feet) and 743 metres (2,468 feet) respectively, and are said to be the Caribbean's most photographed site. Those who like a challenge can hike Gros Piton, while Petit Piton, despite being smaller, is more of a struggle. Once you've enjoyed the sights of the Pitons, head to Sulphur Springs, where you can drive your car right through the heart of the awe-inspiring volcano. Don't worry, it's a dormant volcano, giving you a danger-free view of the inside of one of nature's most destructive forces. You can then finish off your trip with a mud bath in the mineral enriched pools in the shadow of the volcano before washing yourself down underneath the Toraille Waterfall. Soufrière is the only place in the whole of the Caribbean where natural wonders like these exist.

There are more than 7,690 hectares (19,000 acres) of gorgeous rainforest in Saint Lucia, packed with tropical plants and amazing views. And depending on your level of love of adventure,



Sandy Island, just off Carriacou, is famous for its beauty

UNTOUCHED ISLANDS

Much of the Caribbean varies between luxury and natural, rugged beauty. Most of the islands' economies rely on tourism, and as such the most commonly visited areas are dominated by all the amenities that cater to the tourists who flock to the islands in search of sun, sea and sand. However, if you want to experience true, untouched Caribbean, there are a number of inhabited islands you may like to visit to see the area as it was before the tourists arrived.

Los Roques is a Venezuelan archipelago in the Caribbean Sea that truly gives you the experience of being a cast away on a deserted island. For peace and quiet, there are few places in the world like it. Another wonderful location is Carriacou, north of Grenada. Again, there is little in the way of accommodation and activities set up for tourists, but it is famous for its festivals, which are worth attending. And finally you have the remote Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, which has limited tourist development. Jamaica, Barbados and the other popular islands are undoubtedly sublime, but there is something magical about the untouched Caribbean.

you can walk, take a gondola or even zipline through the lush land. After a long day of island adventure, take time to enjoy some of St Lucia's delicious French and Creole-inspired cuisine.

With so many countries and islands available to see and experience, we could go on forever explaining the sights, sounds and tastes available across the 7,000 islands, but what else is there to see and do around the Caribbean?

The Dominican Republic is the region's largest chocolate-producing country and a world leader in Fair Trade chocolate, so it's definitely worth sampling the local delicacy.

Trinidad and Tobago is one of the most developed Caribbean islands, with the third-highest GDP in the Western Hemisphere, which makes it a wholly different experience to the rest of the area. It's well-known for its delicious street food at reasonable prices (given the country's wealth), and it's also renowned as a bird-watcher's paradise.

One of the Caribbean's prime locations for foodies is Saint Martin, which has a range of more than 40 restaurants stretching the length of the beach front in Grand Case. On the subject of food and drink, most islands will have a main rum distillery, and many of those will offer fascinating tours of the rum production process, plus a trip through row upon row of sugar cane. Fish fries are also a Caribbean-wide tradition, with stalls lining up every Friday to whip up delicious fried fish and shellfish. They're wonderful community occasions with music and dancing as well as delicious food. If you fancy working for your supper, you can go for a 'dive and dine' experience on the small island of Nevis. Scuba dive for lobster and – if you're successful – learn how to cook it for a delicious dinner.

Puerto Rico underwent a transformation in the wake of the devastating 2017 hurricane. New restaurants, hotels and activities have sprung up, attracting the holidaymaker types who like their modern luxuries.

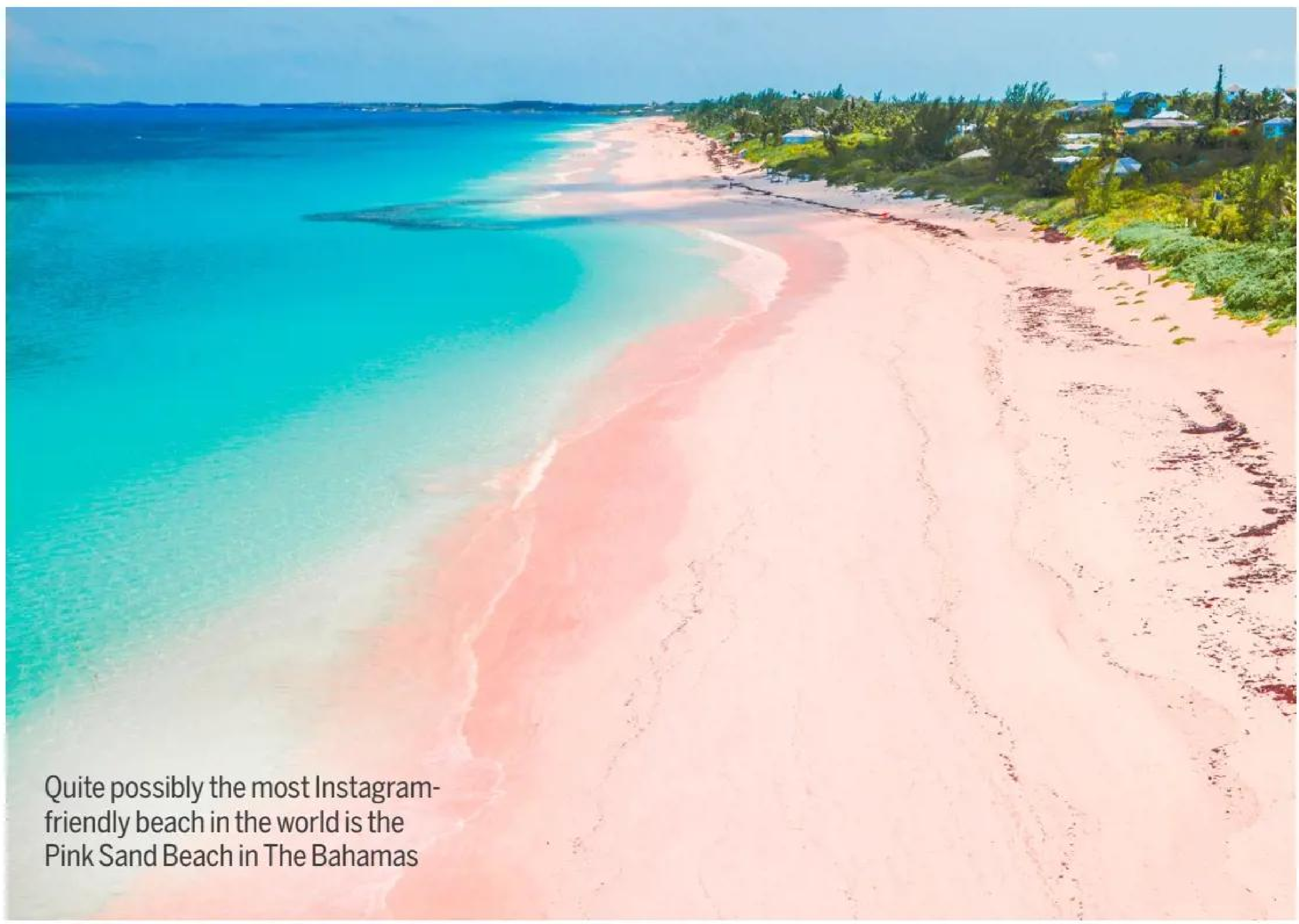
Pretty much every island in the Caribbean is awash with miles of beautiful beaches, but the best surfing is found at Eleuthera Surfer's Beach in The Bahamas, Tortola in the British Virgin Islands, Rincon in Puerto Rico, and the 'Soup Bowl' in Barbados.

©Alamy

Swimming with pigs in The Bahamas is one of the world's most unforgettable experiences

The brochures for the Caribbean inevitably focus on the sandy beaches and luxurious resorts that make the area one of the biggest summer holiday destinations in the world. However, that is most certainly doing the islands that make up the Caribbean a huge disservice, given the wealth of culture, food, history, greenery, topography and activities. The Caribbean is vibrant, fascinating, temperate, welcoming and reasonably priced, as well as being visually stunning. Certainly, it is one of the world's must-visit destinations as there truly is something for every kind of holidaymaker, whether you are in the market for trekking, exploring the islands' history, kicking back to some reggae music, or just relaxing on the beach with a piña colada. Just make sure the swimming pigs don't steal your drink!

The Pitons are among the most photographed sights in the Caribbean


Quite possibly the most Instagram-friendly beach in the world is the Pink Sand Beach in The Bahamas

Visitors to the archipelago can take relaxing boat rides to explore the 21 islands thoroughly

Essential information

Some beaches are closed on certain days, so check with your hotel before heading out.

Best time to visit

August to January (the dry season)

Time zone

UTC-2

CURRENCY

R$

BRAZILIAN REAL

Useful sites

WWW.NORONHABOOKERS.COM/INDEX.HTML
WWW.FERNANDO-DE-NORONHA.ORG
WWW.PARNANORONHA.COM.BR

80

Fernando de Noronha

Find your own piece of paradise in this remote Brazilian archipelago

Almost 2,500 kilometres (1,500 miles) away from the busy beaches of Copacabana sits Brazil's true tropical dreamscape: the 21 islands that make up Fernando de Noronha. Dramatic, almost vertical mountains (think Sugar Loaf in Rio) meet azure, crystalline waters, bordered by dazzling white sand and verdant palm trees. You won't find the tourist crowds and their coconut cocktails here, either – the islands are a Maritime National Park, dutifully protected by Brazilian law.

The islands are actually the summits of submerged mountains, which explains their unusual landscape. But because they are so far away from the South American mainland, these jaw-droppingly beautiful islands have remained largely uninhabited – even today, only about 5,000 people live there. Because of the lack of human activity, all kinds of plants and animals have been able to thrive in the island's climate and rich ecosystem. If you're a budding David Attenborough, you'll be able to identify sea turtles, whales, albatrosses and many more, some of which are totally unique to the area.

In fact, Charles Darwin himself stopped at the islands during his famous Beagle voyage, and was astonished by what he found. "The whole island is one forest and this is so thickly intertwined that it requires great exertion to crawl along. The scenery was very beautiful, and large magnolias and trees covered with delicate flowers ought to have satisfied me."

Nearly 200 years later, the natural beauty that so entranced Darwin is still to be found on the islands today. Immerse your senses in the islands' jungle, and always be on the lookout for exotic animals and plants you may find along the way.

Or, head out onto one of many perfect praias (beaches), such as Sancho or Conceição, and discover the marine life swimming about in the shallows – if you don your snorkel, you're sure to see a rainbow of fish and plants. Go deeper with a dive tour of the islands, and you might be lucky enough to get close to rare dolphins and turtles. You shouldn't even need a diving suit – the waters are warm, and visibility can reach as far as 50 metres (164 feet).

If you'd prefer to simply sit back and soak up the tranquillity, you'll find there's plenty of space on the sand for your towel and suncream. Because tourist numbers are heavily limited to preserve the fragile ecosystem, people are few and far between – it'll be like your own desert island retreat.

Getting to Fernando de Noronha is an adventure all by itself, so it's only for the intrepid! Tourist numbers are limited to just 500 people per day, so you need to do your research to find out how you can become one of these lucky few. You'll have to fly from the cities of Recife or Natal, and while Noronha's hotels are stunning, they are expensive. It's also worth mentioning that tourists have to pay a daily tax to be on the island (about £11/$15 per day), as well as a tax to enter the national park (roughly £30/$40 daily) so the costs can mount up.

However, if visiting this dream destination is top of your list, then money won't matter when you're walking barefoot on the sand, free to act like no one else is around you – because they really aren't.

Banff National Park

Keep an eye out for bears and other Canadian wildlife during your Rocky Mountain adventure

Canada's great outdoors is begging to be explored in this natural wonderland

With its turquoise lakes, colossal pines and snow-capped mountains, Banff National Park's natural beauty makes it a recognisable location. Canada's first national park draws crowds from around the world, but its size and variety make it the ideal place to reflect on nature's majesty in peace.

Situated high in Alberta's Rocky Mountains, Banff town is where many journeys through the national park begin. The main thoroughfare is Banff Avenue, where hotels, restaurants, cafés and shops compete for business from the many tourists.

It's easy to reach many of Banff's best attractions from the town, including Bow Falls, a scenic hike less than half an hour away on foot. Also nearby is the famous Banff Springs Hotel. This grand structure was built by Canadian Pacific Railway in 1914, and resembles a giant castle in the mountains. Luxury is an understatement here – there are 11 restaurants on site, a 27-hole golf course and a spa with its own waterfalls. That's not to mention the 757 stylish rooms, many of which boast sensational views of the surrounding wilderness.

Don't worry if you don't have the holiday budget to stay in such opulent accommodation – Banff is an unforgettable place whether you're inhabiting a tent or a palace. Lake Louise personifies the beauty of the area like nowhere else, its shimmering emerald surface providing the muse for infinite Insta-worthy photographs. Louise is only the most famous of the many mesmerising lakes found throughout Banff National Park. 14 kilometres (nine miles) away, Moraine Lake's glacially fed waters provide an alternative spot for reflective wandering. Canoeing on either lake is an unforgettable experience – the quietest time to go is in the evening, when day-trippers disappear and leave you to enjoy the splendour uninterrupted.

For hiking, Johnston Canyon provides options for all abilities. A quick and easy walk can be had by making your way to the lower falls, while those who wish to be challenged can continue climbing to the upper falls and the canyon beyond.

Prefer to enjoy nature spotting without the exertion of trekking? Take a ride on Banff Gondola. This will take you to the summit of Sulphur Mountain, where you can meander along the mountain boardwalk and 360-degree observation deck while marvelling at the spectacular views around you.

Another appealing option is skiing. Banff has some of the best slopes in Canada, and if you visit during winter you can enjoy gliding through perfect powder in one of three resorts: Lake Louise, Sunshine and Mt. Norquay. Ice skating is a more leisurely option, and can be enjoyed at Chateau Lake Louise. Complete with its own ice castle, a whizz around the rink here makes you feel like you've stepped into your own frozen fairy tale.

Essential information

You need a park pass to stay in Banff, which costs around £5.60 ($7.30) per day.

Best time to visit

June to August (for hiking) or December to March (for skiing)

Time zone

UTC-7

CURRENCY
$
CANADIAN DOLLAR

Useful sites

WWW.BANFF.CA
WWW.BANFFLAKELOUISE.COM
WWW.BANFFANDBEYOND.COM

82

California

Drive across one of America's most diverse states to experience film stars, desert land and more

California is the USA's most-populated state with nearly 40 million inhabitants covering close to 1,300 kilometres (800 miles) of land. The Golden State stretches all the way from the Mexican border in the south to where it joins the state of Oregon. It is also home to some of America's most beautiful National Parks, biggest cities and stunning coastal roads.

California is a place where you can easily spend a whole month exploring the sights and cities, whether you prefer the great outdoors or the urban centres. From high, snowy altitudes in the north of the state around Lake Tahoe, to the desert wastelands of Death Valley further south along the border with Nevada, California is as diverse in culture as it is in scenery.

There is so much to see and do that you should plan for at least two to three weeks here to see the majority of what's on offer. The hardest decision to make is where to start. Flying into Los Angeles Airport, get stuck in to urban culture, Hollywood lifestyle and Californian cuisine. This massive city is home to Beverly Hills, some amazing beaches like Huntington Beach and Long Beach, and a host of incredible architectural marvels and museums.

> THERE IS SO MUCH TO SEE AND DO... THE HARDEST DECISION IS WHERE TO START

It's highly recommended that you hire a car to get the most out of your trip. Head north out of Los Angeles and up to the coastal road that is known as Big Sur. Stopping off at Santa Barbara, you'll feel like you've been transported into the Mediterranean, in a city that reveals its Spanish colonial past within the stucco-style buildings and a warm sea breeze.

Driving along Big Sur on the Pacific Coast Highway is a visually rewarding journey, showing off many cliffs, beaches and ocean views that will make you want to turn around and drive it back again. Just over a four-hour drive away from Santa Barbara is the incredible Sequoia National Park, home to some of the world's largest trees from the Redwood family, the giant sequoia trees. Some of the largest sequoias are big enough to have tunnels cut through them for pedestrians to walk under. Heading up further north and through the Sierra National Forest, you can make camp in the spectacular Yosemite National Park, an area of stunning natural beauty that should not be left out of your itinerary.

A trip to California can't go without a visit to San Francisco, the hilly city that features the notorious Alcatraz prison, now a historical landmark and tourist site, as well as the impressive Golden Gate Bridge that dominates the skyline crossing over the Pacific Ocean. When visiting San Francisco, take a stroll into Fisherman's Wharf for souvenir shopping, seal watching along the harbour's edge, and great local cuisine and fish markets.

Head once again onto the open road to get back in touch with nature by exploring an incredible line-up of national parks and forests. It's possible to experience ski resorts and sandy

LOS ANGELES

Los Angeles is a massive city that deserves a long weekend soaking it all up. Home to Universal Studios and the Walt Disney Concert Hall, Los Angeles has a history like no other city. When you're not absorbed into the LA film culture, take a stroll down Santa Monica Pier and along some of California's busiest beaches, soaking up sun, sea and surf culture. Drive up to Sunset Boulevard into Hollywood and get to know this bustling city even better. Dine out in the Chinatown district for a great LA experience with an oriental flavour, or hang out at The Getty on the outskirts of the city, which features American and European architecture, artworks and beautifully cared-for gardens. You can also enjoy a stunning view over the entire city from here.

It's free entry into The Getty so it's well worth a visit for the spectacular view overlooking the city of LA

Essential information

It's easy to underestimate distances while driving across California, so planning is crucial.

Best time to visit

September to November

Time zone

UTC-8

CURRENCY
$
US DOLLAR

Useful sites

WWW.DISCOVERLOSANGELES.COM
WWW.SFTRAVEL.COM
WWW.NPS.GOV/YOSE

Like most national parks in the States, Yosemite is breathtakingly beautiful – a couple of days spent exploring this wilderness is recommended

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

83

This is a place that's inspired photographers and naturalists the world over. The impressive El Capitan cliff face and the Half Dome rock formation feature as part of these grand surroundings. A visit to Yosemite National Park should include a walk up to the top of Yosemite Falls and Bridalveil Fall, a huge waterfall that's best visited during the spring and early summer months to see it in full flow.

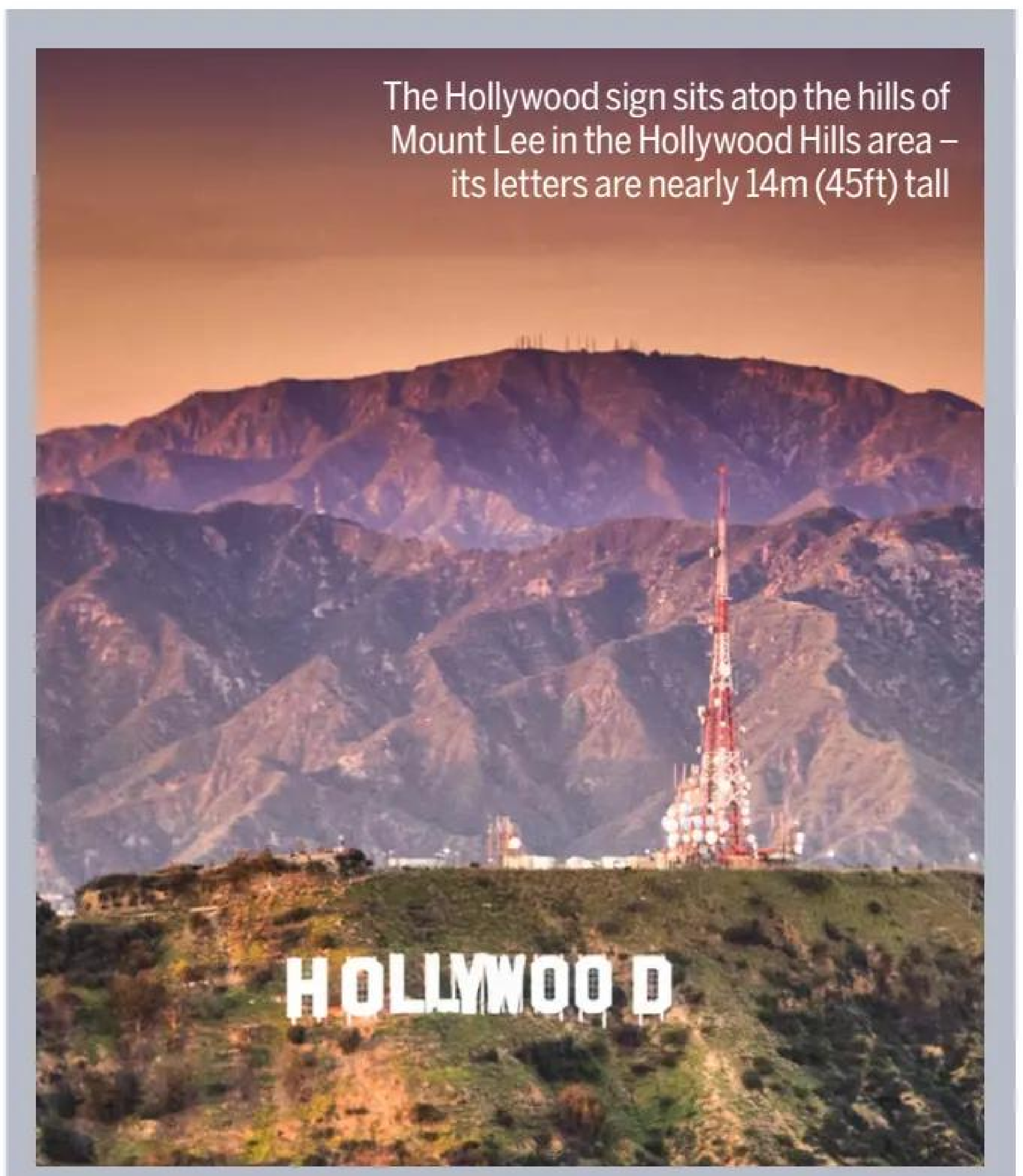
Ancient trees and granite monoliths dissect the picture-postcard Tunnel View panorama. Search deeper in Yosemite and you'll come across beautiful lakes and mountains adorned by giant sequoia trees. During the winter months (December to March), resorts open up offering activities such as snowboarding and skiing for a different adventure.

The unmistakable Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco is an impressive site to behold and well worth a drive across

beaches all in one place in Tahoe National Forest, 160 kilometres (100 miles) east from the state capital of Sacramento. Because of such varying altitudes, weather conditions can change dramatically, so be prepared for every eventuality.

Driving south along the Californian border with Nevada, you'll reach the vast expanse that is Death Valley National Park; a place of extreme temperature and desert landscapes that will take any hardened traveller by surprise. Dropping below sea level in parts, and featuring incredibly harsh terrain, you will leave thinking you weren't in California at all, but perhaps on another planet! Venturing further south into the desert-like Joshua Tree National Park, explore a vast expanse of wilderness that's home to a number of exciting flora and fauna, including the Joshua tree, a plant that is unique to only this part of the world.

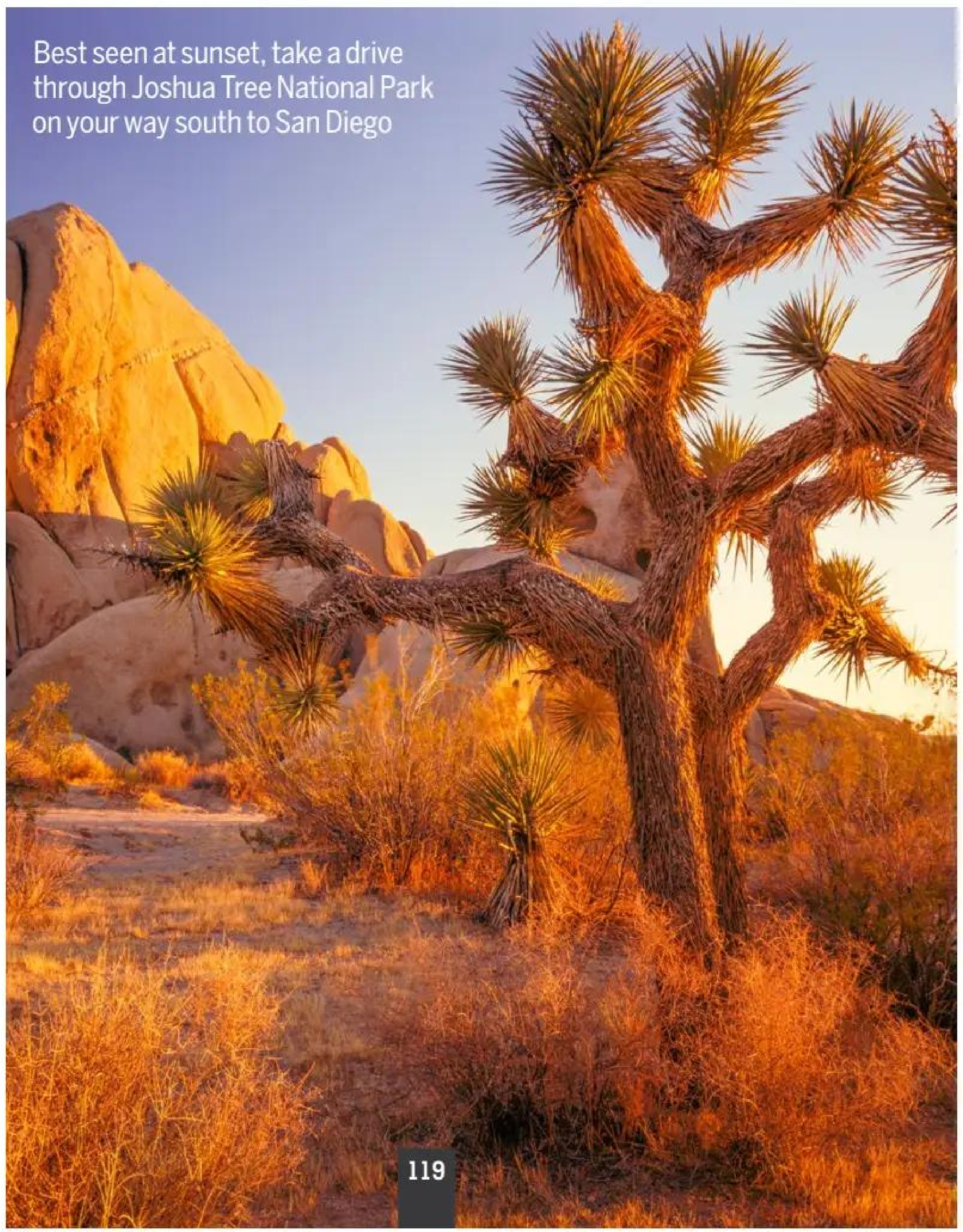
San Diego is California's most southerly city and one that deserves a long weekend exploring its sights and attractions. Spend a day at the San Diego Zoo located in Balboa Park, a massive complex with gardens consisting of Spanish-Renaissance architecture in the downtown area. Hop aboard the USS Midway Museum for a historic flight centre featuring simulators and restored aircrafts, and take time to explore San Diego at night to see how the city comes to life after hours.


The Hollywood sign sits atop the hills of Mount Lee in the Hollywood Hills area – its letters are nearly 14m (45ft) tall

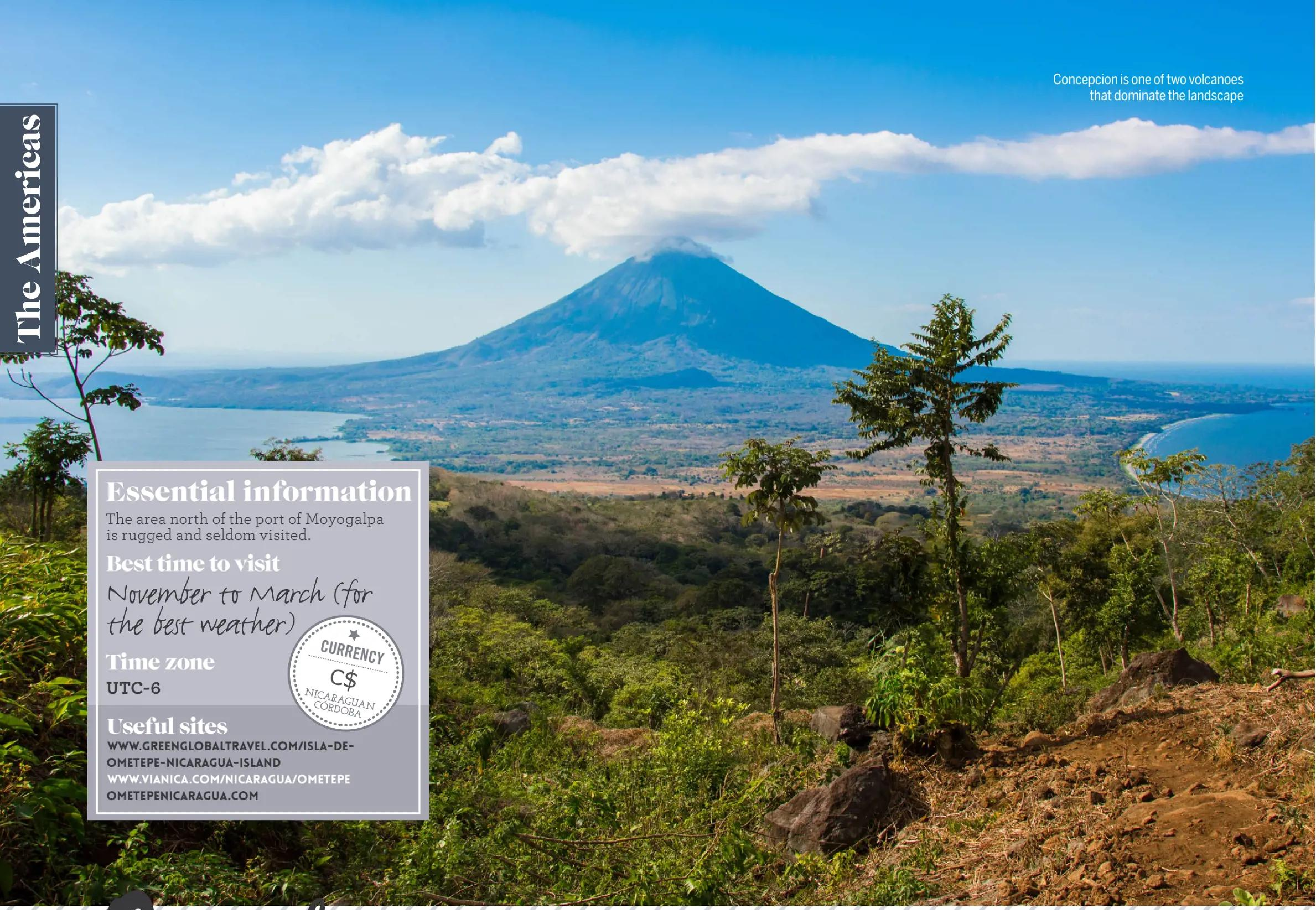
HOLLYWOOD

Hollywood is a name that has been recognised world over as one of the most influential film industries. Set in a neighbourhood of Los Angeles, Hollywood is home to the Oscars and Paramount Pictures, among many other influential studios. This is a movie buff's paradise – the place where it all began.

You can dive right in to the origins of cinema by taking a stroll along the Walk of Fame, trying to locate your favourite film stars on the pavements. There's also an outdoor cinema at Griffith Park, which invites you to watch a movie under the stars. Finally, why not pop in to The Hollywood Museum to learn about its history? Don't forget to snap a shot of the Hollywood sign on your way out!


Best seen at sunset, take a drive through Joshua Tree National Park on your way south to San Diego

Stop off at the beaches and shores along Big Sur – a must-see when planning your trip



Concepcion is one of two volcanoes that dominate the landscape

Essential information

The area north of the port of Moyogalpa is rugged and seldom visited.

Best time to visit

November to March (for the best weather)

Time zone

UTC-6

CURRENCY

C$

NICARAGUAN CÓRDOBA

Useful sites

WWW.GREENGLOBALTRAVEL.COM/ISLA-DE-OMETEPE-NICARAGUA-ISLAND
WWW.VIANICA.COM/NICARAGUA/OMETEPE
OMETEPENICARAGUA.COM

91

Ometepe

The volcanic island of Ometepe rises from Lake Nicaragua in the Central American country

An island of reverence and awe since ancient times, Ometepe rises from the depths of Lake Nicaragua, which dominates the southwestern region of the Central American nation of Nicaragua, brushing against the coastline of the Pacific Ocean.

The crown jewel of two magnificent volcanoes, Concepcion and Maderas, Ometepe encompasses 276 square kilometres (107 square miles), the world's largest island situated in a freshwater lake. Its shape resembles an hourglass, two distinct islets joined by a small isthmus. The two grand volcanoes tower above the landscape and lakeside vistas. In the northwest, Concepcion reaches 1,609 metres (5,280 feet) elevation, while in the southeast Maderas soars to 1,394 metres (4,574 feet).

A vision of paradise for its pre-Columbian native peoples, Ometepe indeed remains a place of natural beauty seldom seen anywhere else. Dense jungle conceals its wealth of waterfalls, beautiful springs and abundant wildlife, but those who venture to Ometepe are rewarded with the experience of a lifetime. Hikers, birdwatchers and nature enthusiasts of every description find fulfilment in a variety of activities, and the entire island is designated a UNESCO biosphere reserve. Challenging hikes through the rainforest trails and up the slopes of Concepcion or Maderas require from seven to ten hours. However, the rewards are stunning. The ancient Maderas crater is today a lagoon, while the summit of Concepcion offers panoramic, unrestricted views of the island and its surroundings.

Ecotourism thrives on Ometepe, and watercraft travel back and forth to the mainland several times a day, docking at the port town of Moyogalpa, where amenities are readily available. This includes hotel accommodations or more inexpensive hostel-style lodgings, as well as restaurants, refreshments and stores where necessities may be procured. Car, motorcycle and bicycle rental companies operate there as well. The most expedient route to Ometepe is the boat from the town of San Jorge, and the one-way trip requires about an hour. The fare is inexpensive at about £1.50 ($2). A larger ferry from the town of Granada is not quite as dependable as the San Jorge schedule, running twice a week to the northern town of Altagracia. Overland distance between Moyogalpa and Altagracia is 24 kilometres (15 miles).

The nature reserve of Charco Verde is located near Altagracia, and visitors become acquainted with the native species, including howler monkeys, boa constrictors and a variety of birds. The reserve lagoon is a quiet place of mangrove trees casting light and shadow across the waters, and always under the watchful gaze of the dominant volcanoes. Hotel accommodations, shops and restaurants thrive in Altagracia, where the pre-Columbian heritage of Ometepe is celebrated in a museum that houses examples of ceramics, statues and ancient carvings – well worth a visit.

Stopping off at Santo Domingo Beach en route to Altagracia is a pleasant diversion for an afternoon, and other beautiful beaches are accessible along the road connecting the two sides of Ometepe. On the southwestern slope of Maderas lie the enchanting villages of San Ramón and Mérida. Both are adjacent to Lake Nicaragua, and San Ramón is famous for its breathtaking waterfall.

86

Cancún

A famous holiday spot, Mexico's Cancún offers sun, nightlife and archaeological wonders

The lure of the crystal-blue Caribbean Sea, the wonder of the ancient Mayan civilisation, and neon nightlife that is second to none make the charm of Cancún – a world-famous resort on the Yucatán Peninsula of Mexico – irresistible.

Cancún, first developed as a tourism mecca in the 1970s, has grown in popularity among holidaymakers, and the reasons are many. Sparkling sandy beaches and the stunning Caribbean provide the setting for a variety of water sports, including diving, parasailing, riding watercraft, and exploring neighbouring islands by boat. Shopping, fine dining and a round of golf are appealing options as well.

The breathtaking archaeological history of the Maya, one of the world's oldest cultures, is explored by thousands annually. Accommodations are plentiful in the Cancún Hotel Zone, and range from unsurpassed luxury to economical. After dark, a vibrant club scene brings local culture and top entertainment to life, with stunning shows featuring dancers, acrobats and other performers.

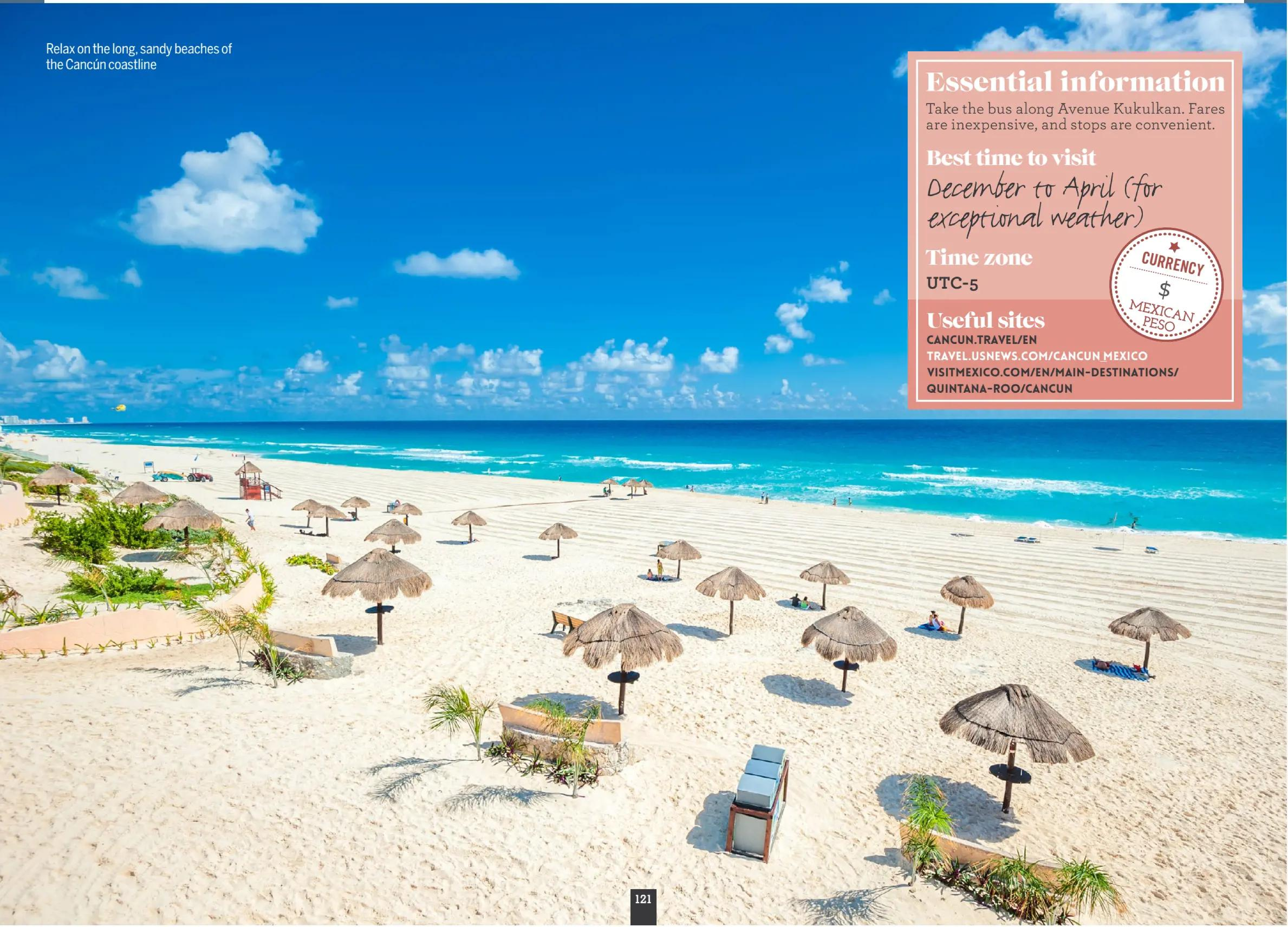
Located on the southeast coast of the Mexican Yucatán in the state of Quintana Roo, Cancún is famous the world over for its variety and spice of life. Getting there is relatively simple. Travellers are required to have a passport and tourism card, which is available through your airline of choice, any Mexican consulate, or the Mexican tourism office. Daily air service is available via Cancún International Airport. Take a taxi from the airport to the Hotel Zone, approximately 24 kilometres (15 miles) away. Accommodations in the Hotel Zone range from all-inclusive resorts to clean, inexpensive rooms for travellers on a budget.

The primary thoroughfare in the Hotel Zone is Avenue Kukulkan, lined with shops and restaurants, and often crowded with vendors and pedestrians. Spend the day soaking up the spectacular Caribbean sun at Playa Tortugas, a popular beach among locals and visitors alike, where refreshments are just a short walk away. The pristine sands of Playa Delfines offer a beach less travelled, with little commercial development and a quieter setting.

For those interested in Mayan culture, the El Rey ruins are located in the centre of the Hotel Zone. Dating to 1200 CE, they are easily accessible and offer a taste of the rich heritage of the Yucatán. Other Mayan historical sites are nearby, but for the more adventurous, the great city of Chichen Itza, with its famed step pyramids, lies just two hours to the west. Excursions are available, but they sell out quickly.

Outlying islands, such as Isla Mujeres, offer charms all their own. A lovely fishing village just 20 minutes by ferry from Cancún, the town and island provide ecotourism adventures such as the turtle farm at Sac Bajo, diving and snorkelling at El Garrafon, and encounters such as swimming with dolphins.

Of course, the Cancún nightlife is second to none, and opportunities for an evening of diversion abound. Cancún has largely escaped the drug-related issues that have plagued other areas of Mexico in recent years. However, stay within the designated areas and remember to guard valuables and personal possessions. Law enforcement personnel are visible and active.



Relax on the long, sandy beaches of the Cancún coastline

Essential information

Take the bus along Avenue Kukulkan. Fares are inexpensive, and stops are convenient.

Best time to visit

December to April (for exceptional weather)

Time zone

UTC-5

CURRENCY

$

MEXICAN PESO

Useful sites

CANCUN.TRAVEL/EN
TRAVEL.USNEWS.COM/CANCUN_MEXICO
VISITMEXICO.COM/EN/MAIN-DESTINATIONS/QUINTANA-ROO/CANCUN

Machu Picchu

Explore Peru's mighty Inca ruins nestled deep in the Andes mountain range

Machu Picchu is a sight to behold; a set of distinct stone ruins perched in the misty valleys of the Andes mountains. Dating back to the 15th century, the citadel is relatively young, and questions pertaining to how such large stones were transported up to 2,430 metres (7,972 feet) above sea level still shroud the ruins in mystery. This UNESCO World Heritage site attracts thousands of visitors each day, proving the fact that it remains one of the most intriguing and important archaeological sites to date.

There are many features to the Machu Picchu citadel that still stand as stone structures today, though some are more complete than others. Taking a walk up the stone terraces and through the Old City Gate, you get a true sense of what might have happened in this historic complex. Walking into the Ceremonial Centre and standing in the rooms that were once used by revered individuals such as astronomers, scientists and political figures, you become filled with an undeniable curiosity. The large open spaces and expansive views over the Andes is a sight that will stay with you for years after.

Reaching Machu Picchu is no easy feat, and even opting for the most travel-friendly route still makes this a hard-to-reach destination. Accessible in a couple of ways, the most adventurous option is the famous 43-kilometre (26-mile) Inca Trail; a four-day trek that takes travellers through Peru's Sacred Valley and across scenic foothills to experience other Incan ruins along the way, before finally reaching Machu Picchu. The other method, and one that is far less testing, is by reaching the small mountain town of Aguas Calientes via a train that departs from the small village of Ollantaytambo. From there, hop on a dedicated bus up towards the Machu Picchu ruins just before sunrise for a photographic opportunity. Then, walk the rocky steps back down to Aguas Calientes for a more challenging descent.

After exploring the main citadel, you can navigate around different routes to explore the various ruins from a different perspective. Why not make an ascent up a hill climb towards the Sun Gate, once the original entrance into the Machu Picchu complex? Cross over to the adjacent mountain and climb up Huayna Picchu (also written as Wayna Picchu), where at the top you can take a moment to experience spectacular panoramic views over Machu Picchu and surrounding valleys of the vast Andes mountain range.

Entrance into the Machu Picchu complex will cost around £35 ($45) per person. It's important to bear in mind that there is a 2,500-person limit per day, so booking in advance is vital. If you're planning on climbing Huayna Picchu as well, a combined ticket will cost you around £46 ($60), but there are even fewer of these available, with restrictions to certain times of the day (more information on this can be found by visiting www.machupicchu.gob.pe).

Visiting Machu Picchu and walking the Inca Trail is a truly unforgettable experience that will make your South American trip one to remember forever.

Essential information

It's best to book with a tour group if you're planning on tackling the Inca Trail.

Best time to visit

May to September

Time zone

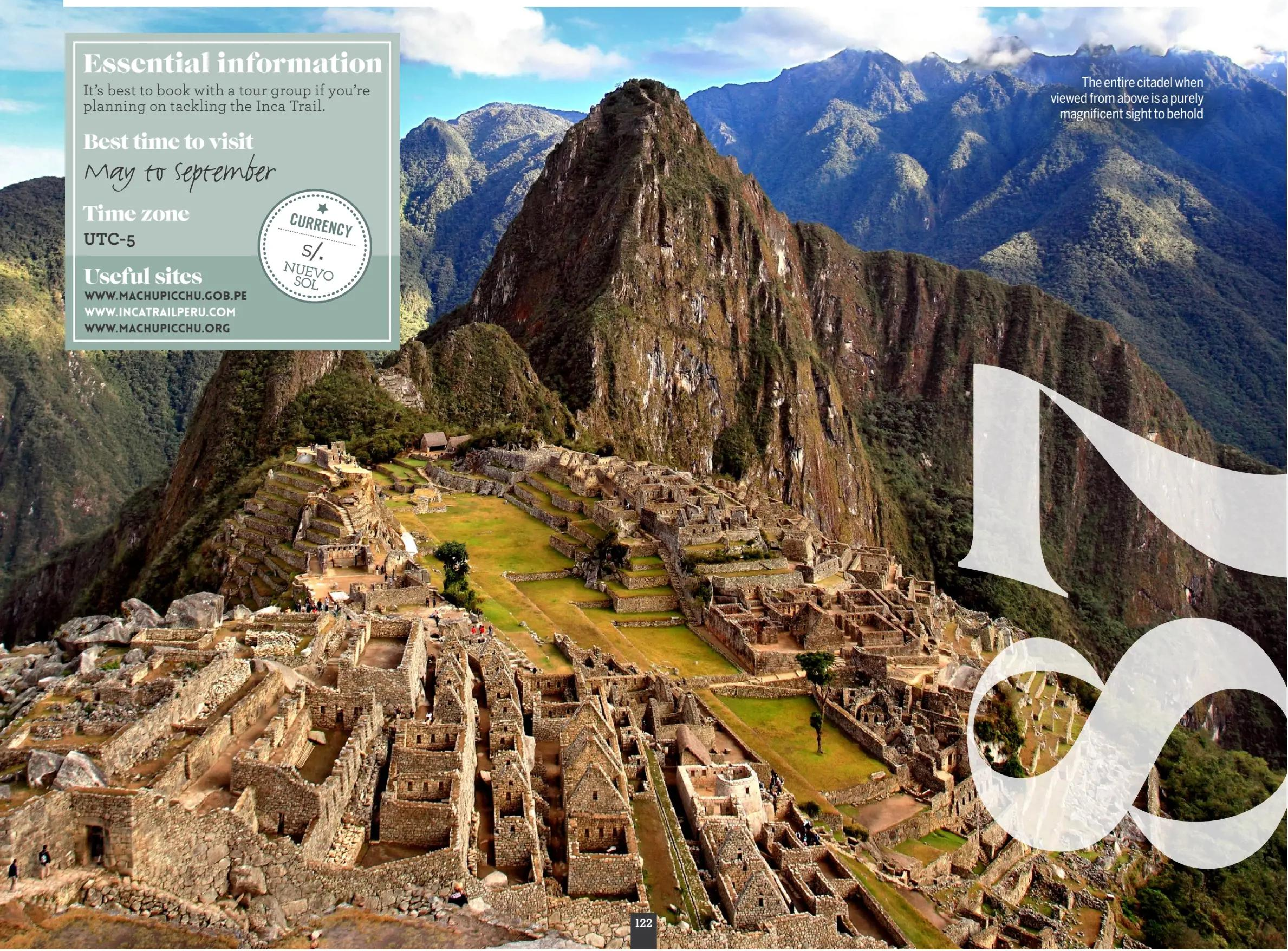
UTC-5

Currency

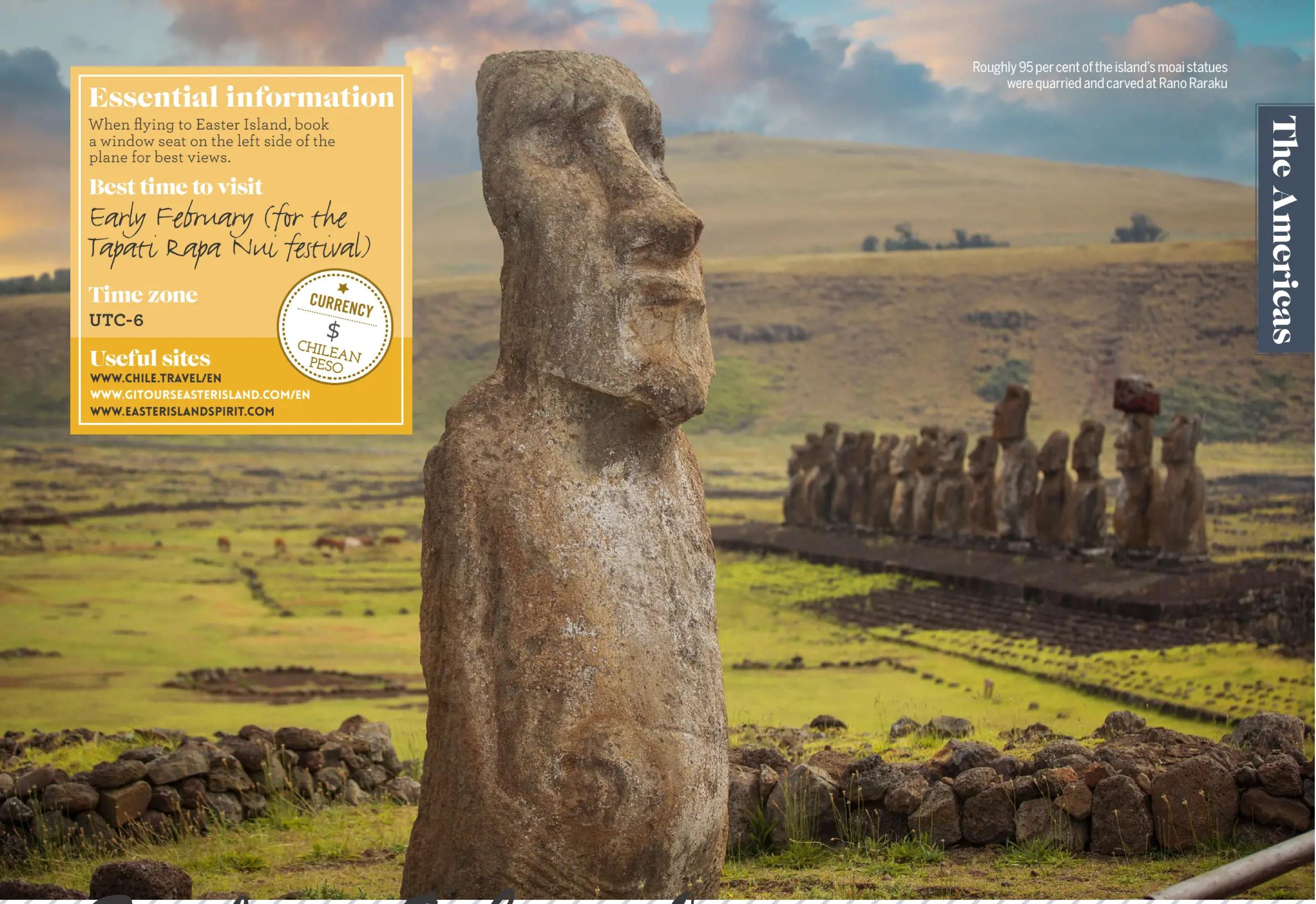
S/.
NUEVO SOL

Useful sites

WWW.MACHUPICCHU.GOB.PE
WWW.INCATRAILPERU.COM
WWW.MACHUPICCHU.ORG



The entire citadel when viewed from above is a purely magnificent sight to behold



Roughly 95 per cent of the island's moai statues were quarried and carved at Rano Raraku

Essential information

When flying to Easter Island, book a window seat on the left side of the plane for best views.

Best time to visit

Early February (for the Tapati Rapa Nui festival)

Time zone

UTC-6

CURRENCY

$

CHILEAN PESO

Useful sites

WWW.CHILE.TRAVEL/EN
WWW.GITOURSEASTERISLAND.COM/EN
WWW.EASTERISLANDSPIRIT.COM

88

Easter Island

Truly in the middle of nowhere, Chile's Easter Island begs more questions than it provides answers

Around 1,000 years ago, Polynesian settlers landed at an untouched island thousands of miles from the nearest continent, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. They considered it so distant, they named it 'Te Pito o te Henua' or 'the navel of the world'.

On the island they found a number of dormant volcanoes, relics of the violent eruptions that formed the isle thousands of years earlier. At the southern tip was Rano Kau, whose crater now comprised a lake. Settlers climbed 150 metres (492 feet) down to the grass-covered water, which they believed led all the way to the centre of the earth.

As agriculture thrived, the population blossomed. Somewhere between 1400 and 1650 CE, the society began a remarkable tradition: building increasingly large statues to honour the dead. They called these moai – which means 'to exist' – crafting them from tuff, or compressed volcanic ash, mostly quarried from the volcano Rano Raraku. The islanders would carve the statues at the volcano site, using hard rock, and then transport them across the island.

Today, Easter Island, known locally as Rapa Nui, boasts 1,000 statues, weighing up to 86 tonnes (189,500 pounds) and stretching ten metres (33 feet) tall. They serve as majestic landmarks, scattered amid the island's grasslands, volcanoes and intermittent beaches.

The hiking trail from Hanga Roa passes the sinister volcanic Ana Kai Tangata cave, softened with red, white and black cave paintings – depicting manutara birds, the symbol of the island's Tangata Manu, or bird-man, cult. Continuing on, the route takes trekkers up the island's infamous Rano Kau volcano, home to the ceremonial village of Orongo – which served as a base for the annual bird-man competition, where competitors hurled their bodies down cliffs, swimming past sea turtles and collecting eggs from a nearby islet.

Roughly 150 metres (492 feet) inland from the white sandy beach of Anakena, nestled among the palms, seven moai mark the site believed to be the island's birthplace, their heads adorned with topknots – a tribute to the local belief that hair holds special powers, which is why high-ranking men would wear their hair long.

How the Stone Age tribesmen were able to move such enormous statues has long been a mystery. While some have speculated they were teleported by aliens, they were most likely rolled atop tree trunks. Unfortunately, overpopulation led to mass deforestation, in turn leaving the islanders without a means of transporting their beloved moai. As a result, almost half of the island's statues sit unfinished at the Rano Raraku volcano quarry site.

Wandering among the megaliths, some buried up to their necks, others still stood within the crater, is a truly surreal experience. Examining their distinctive features in silence, you are simultaneously connected to the lost civilisation, while made intimately aware of its downfall.

On the east coast, just below the oldest of its three main volcanoes, Poike, is Ahu Tongariki, the largest cluster of moai – 15 statues sitting on a stone platform, which aligns with the sun during the summer solstice. Inland, Ahu Huri a Urenga features a single moai with four hands – kept company by horses chewing on grass and cawing seagulls – which doubles as an observatory, marking the winter solstice sunrise.

Florida

Uncover the unexpected variety of the USA's Sunshine State

Miami offers a combination of US metropolis and Latin American flair

Florida. That means Disney, right? In 1959, Walt Disney chose the city of Orlando to be the location of his new holiday resort, although he did not live to see Walt Disney World open its doors to visitors for the first time in 1971. Since then, The City Beautiful has become the global capital of theme parks. From pirates and princesses to wizards and whales, there's an Orlando theme park to suit every taste. Millions of visitors each year choose between the gargantuan complexes of Disney, Universal Studios, SeaWorld and Legoland. If such vast and hyperactive theme parks aren't your thing, try the smaller and more manageable Gatorland or Fun Spot America. Or maybe the Holy Land Experience, a Christian-based theme park, is more your thing?

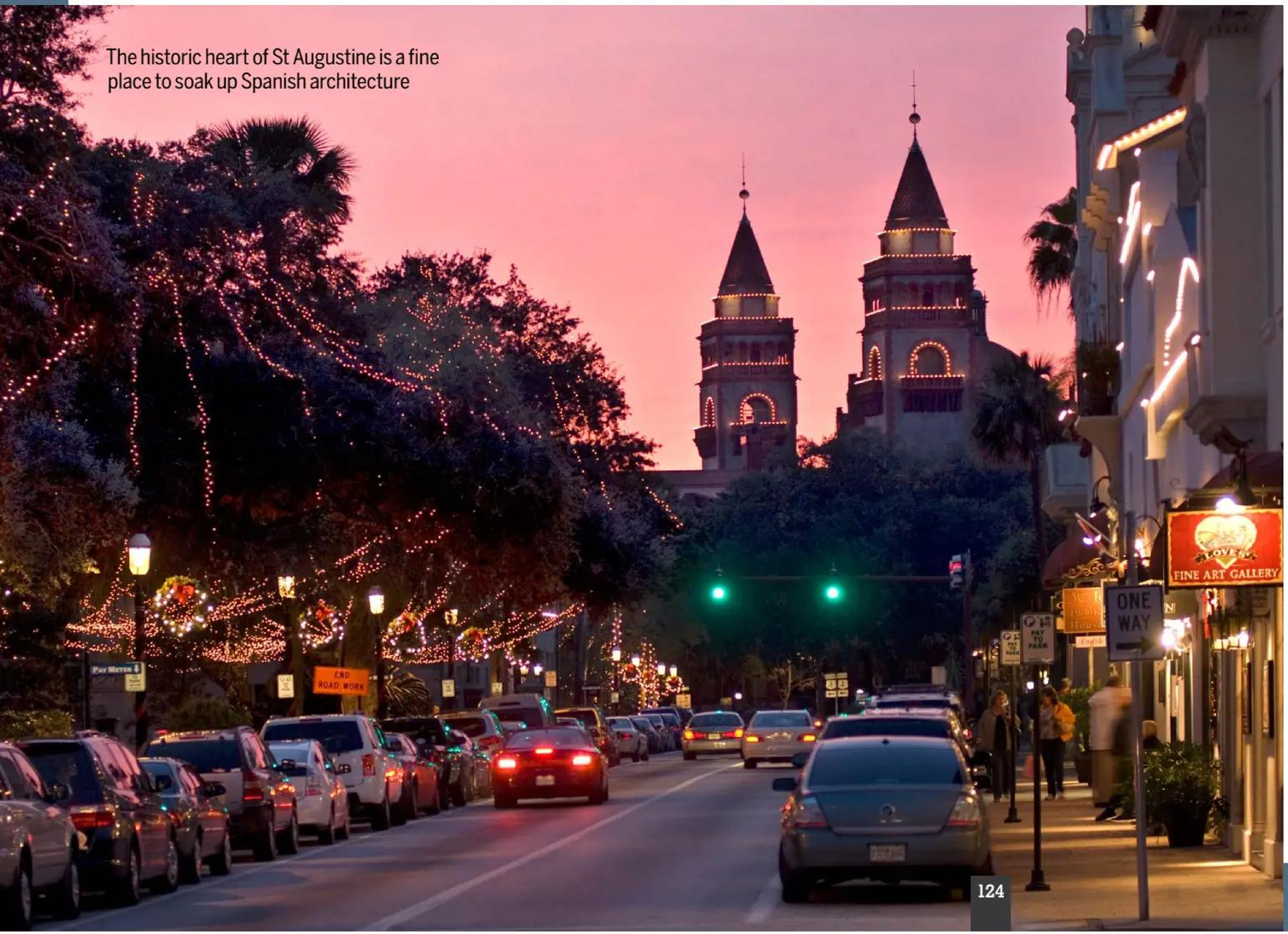
Theme park fanatics who are prepared to go slightly further afield should also consider the African-influenced Busch Gardens, 128 kilometres (80 miles) west of Orlando in the outskirts of Tampa, while many drive 80 kilometres (50 miles) east to Kennedy Space Center at Cape Canaveral to get up close to Space Shuttle Atlantis and a Saturn V rocket. For a peek behind the scenes, book one of the special tours of the launch complex.

It's possible to spend weeks hopping from one theme park to another across Florida's central belt – and many do – but such an itinerary ignores Florida's many and varied other attractions. Miami, probably the state's most famous city, combines an American metropolis with Latin flair – imagine the child of New York and Rio de Janeiro. The central district of Little Havana is probably where the Cuban influence is at its highest. Watch the locals play cards and dominos on fold-up tables in Gomez Park, and take an edible journey down the best cafes on Calle Ocho with a food tour.

The museums of Downtown Miami are worth a visit, as are the hip and vibrant northern districts of Midtown and Upper Eastside; but most visitors actually spend a lot of their time on Miami Beach, a separate city located on a reef across Biscayne Bay. Here you can soak up the Art Deco architecture of Ocean Drive at the same time as soaking up the rays. Take time to wander the South Beach district, as busy at night as it is during the day, with hundreds of nightclubs, restaurants, boutiques and hotels, and a number of quirky, colourful lifeguard stands.

South Beach may be among the most famous of American beaches, but there is no shortage of alternatives for those who want to avoid the crowds. With 2,000 kilometres (1,250 miles) of coastline, the Sunshine State nestles between the Atlantic Ocean and the Gulf of Mexico. Those who want to try a spot of surfing could do worse than Laguna Beach on the strip of non-peninsula Florida known as the Panhandle. On the Atlantic coast, the hard sand of Daytona Beach was once used as a racecar track. Races ended when an internationally renowned racetrack was built in the city, but the beach is one of the few remaining that are still open to motorists – albeit at a slower speed. Further down the coast, West Palm Beach sits directly west of Grand Bahama and enjoys a similar reputation for snorkelling and sea life.

> THE PACE OF LIFE IN THE KEYS IS SLOW AND STEADY. WHAT'S THE RUSH?


The historic heart of St Augustine is a fine place to soak up Spanish architecture

Off the southern tip of the state, the Florida Keys is an archipelago of 1,700 islands stretching into the Gulf of Mexico. Many of them are linked by US Highway 1, which begins in Key West – an island city at the tip of the Keys – and stretches all the way to the Canadian border with Maine. Most will drive only the picturesque 260 kilometres (160 miles) section to Key West from Miami. If hiring a vehicle, try to get a convertible and, when you hit the first overwater section at Key Largo, let the roof drop and the sea breeze whistle through your hair. But don't press too hard on the accelerator. The speed limit is strictly enforced and, anyway, the pace of life in the Keys is slow and steady. What's the rush? Just don't

Take a stunning drive across the Seven Mile Bridge in the Florida Keys

Essential information

Skip the theme park queues without the cost of fast-track tickets by getting to popular rides early in the day.

Best time to visit

December to May (to avoid hurricane season)

Time zone

UTC-5

Currency

$ US DOLLAR

Useful sites

VISITFLORIDA.COM
VISITORLANDO.COM
MIAMIANDBEACHES.COM

Over 37km (23m) of sandy paradise awaits in Fort Lauderdale, including five Blue Wave beaches

forget the fuel: gas for the car and local speciality Key lime pie for the driver.

Another fine road trip from Miami is to take Highway 41 across the state. Once out of Miami's urban sprawl, you'll spend an hour traversing Everglades National Park. This vast tropical wilderness of wetland and forest is the result of slow-moving river water flowing into Florida Bay. Stop at the Shark Valley or Gulf Coast Visitor Center for a chance to take a ride on one of the iconic airboats that skim across the grass swamp. This spectacular ecosystem is home to crocodiles, manatees, plenty of snakes and the Florida panther. Also keep an eye on the sky for ospreys and the national animal of the USA, the bald eagle.

Geographically, Florida is part of the Deep South, but it shares a relatively short land border only with Georgia and Alabama. It means that, conversely, Deep South culture is strongest the further north you go in the state. Here you'll find traditional southern food, politics and values. Although both Florida's state capital, Tallahassee, and biggest city, Jacksonville, can be found in the north, a better place to explore the region from is St Augustine. This small settlement was founded by Spanish explorer Pedro Menéndez de Avilés in 1565, making it the USA's oldest city. It's chock-full of Spanish-influenced historic buildings around a picturesque bay and lighthouse. Speaking of lighthouses, with such a long coastline to oversee, Florida is home to a surfeit of them, and visiting lighthouses has become a hobby akin to trainspotting. Key West and Ponce de Leon are home to two favourites beyond St Augustine.

By all means fly to Orlando for a fix of Mickey Mouse and Harry Potter, but be sure to explore further afield. Florida is not an unfamiliar destination to holidaymakers, but those who escape beyond the theme parks will discover a surprising variety of riches in the Sunshine State.

Airboats are an easy and fun way to explore the swamps of Everglades National Park

Over 20 million people visit Magic Kingdom each year to enjoy Walt Disney's fantasy world

©Alamy

90

DISNEY WORLD

The cultural behemoth that is Walt Disney World near Florida has to be seen to be believed. The 101 square kilometre (39 square mile) site centres on four different theme parks, all of which individually make the top ten of the world's most-visited theme parks. Families flock to the Magic Kingdom – watch children's faces light up as they walk through the entrance tunnels onto Main Street with Cinderella's Castle at the end. Photo opportunities abound, whether you prefer your princess to be classic Snow White or more modern Moana.

Grown-up visitors might prefer the thrills of the Twilight Zone Tower of Terror or *Star Wars* simulator in Disney's Hollywood Studios. And don't forget two of the world's three most popular waterparks, two shopping and entertainment districts, three 18-hole golf courses and a sports stadium complex. Even Cruella de Vil would find something to raise a smile.

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91 Fraser Island
page 128

92 Queenstown
page 130

93 Christmas Island
page 131

94 Sydney
page 132

95 Great Barrier Reef
page 135

96 Daintree
page 137

97 Fiji
page 138

98 Fiordland National Park
page 139

99 Tasmania
page 140

100 Rotorua
page 141

101 French Polynesia
page 142

Fraser Island

Set alongside Australia's Queensland coast is a mysterious island, fiercely unique and wild

Part of the Great Sandy National Park, Fraser Island is home to the world's oldest dunes. However, this is no typical subtropical paradise. Stretching 123 kilometres (76 miles) long and 22 kilometres (14 miles) wide, at 184,000 hectares (454,674 acres), Fraser Island is the largest sand island in the world. More than that, dressed in luscious layers of foliage, the UNESCO World Heritage Site is the planet's only sand island to boast a rainforest. It is an island in motion, an ever-evolving snapshot of nature at its most innovative and raw.

Fraser Island sits along the Fraser Coast, 300 kilometres (186 miles) north of Brisbane. While road-trippers board the Manta Ray Barge from Inskip Point, ramblers often prefer to take the more leisurely 50-minute Fraser Island Barge, from River Heads, 20 minutes south of Hervey Bay. Truly daring souls may even opt for the scenic, albeit tiny, Air Fraser Island plane. No matter how it is reached, a good starting point is to stock up on supplies at the settlements of Eurong, Happy Valley, Cathedrals or Orchid Beach – though visitors are advised to bring medical kits and water with them when they visit.

From here, Fraser Island, known by its aboriginal name of K'gari, is best enjoyed aboard a four-wheel drive (or 4WD), throttling along its 250-kilometre (155-mile) shoreline, rocky roads and looming rainforests. However, the island's great lure is as a socket to connect to nature – and it could be argued that the only way to truly do so is the 90-kilometre (56-mile), six-day Fraser Island Great Walk, from the northeastern Happy Valley to the southeastern Dilli Village – with plenty of camping breaks along the way. For casual walkers, the journey can also be enjoyed in chunks – ranging from a few hours to an overnight trek.

Along the way, the island unveils its hidden gems, not so much diamonds in the rough, as perpetual masterpieces, forever in perfection. The island's most immediately staggering feature is its rainforest. Across Pile Valley, which has survived some serious deforestation, giant satinay trees stretch straight towards the clear blue sky, alongside the brush box, spreading outwards like bursts of green clouds. They are joined by thin piccabeen palms with outstretched feathery fronds, and cherry satinash, sprouting a popular 'bush food', along with the resilient blush satinash, abloom with fluffy, white flowers. Elsewhere, Wanggoolba Creek is shaded beneath a walkway of rare king ferns, holding their leaning fronds up using water pressure.

Behind the northeastern lookout of Waddy Point, the subtropical rainforest is characterised by the scribbly gum – a light-coloured eucalyptus tree, with dark scribbles drawn up by the scribbly moth's larvae. These are kept company by the red bloodwood, an evergreen reaching heights of 35 metres (115 feet), oozing with an essential oil much-coveted in aboriginal herbal medicine. While Fraser Island's choppy seas are considered unsafe for swimming, the nearby Champagne Pools create a natural set of swimming holes along the shoreline. Looking east towards the Coral Sea, it is the only place one can enjoy the island's saltwater – especially during low-tide, when the pools are lapped only by soft waves, hauling in the occasional fish.

One of the island's more curious wonders is its 40 kilometres (25 miles) of coloured sandy cliffs. Known as The Pinnacles, they are believed by the indigenous Butchulla people to have been created by the Rainbow Serpent. Heading south towards Eli Creek, 72 shades of sand dance from

Essential information

If faced with a dingo, keep still and cross your arms over your chest. Then, facing the dingo, slowly walk backwards.

Best time to visit

July to November (for whale watching – August to October for humpbacks)

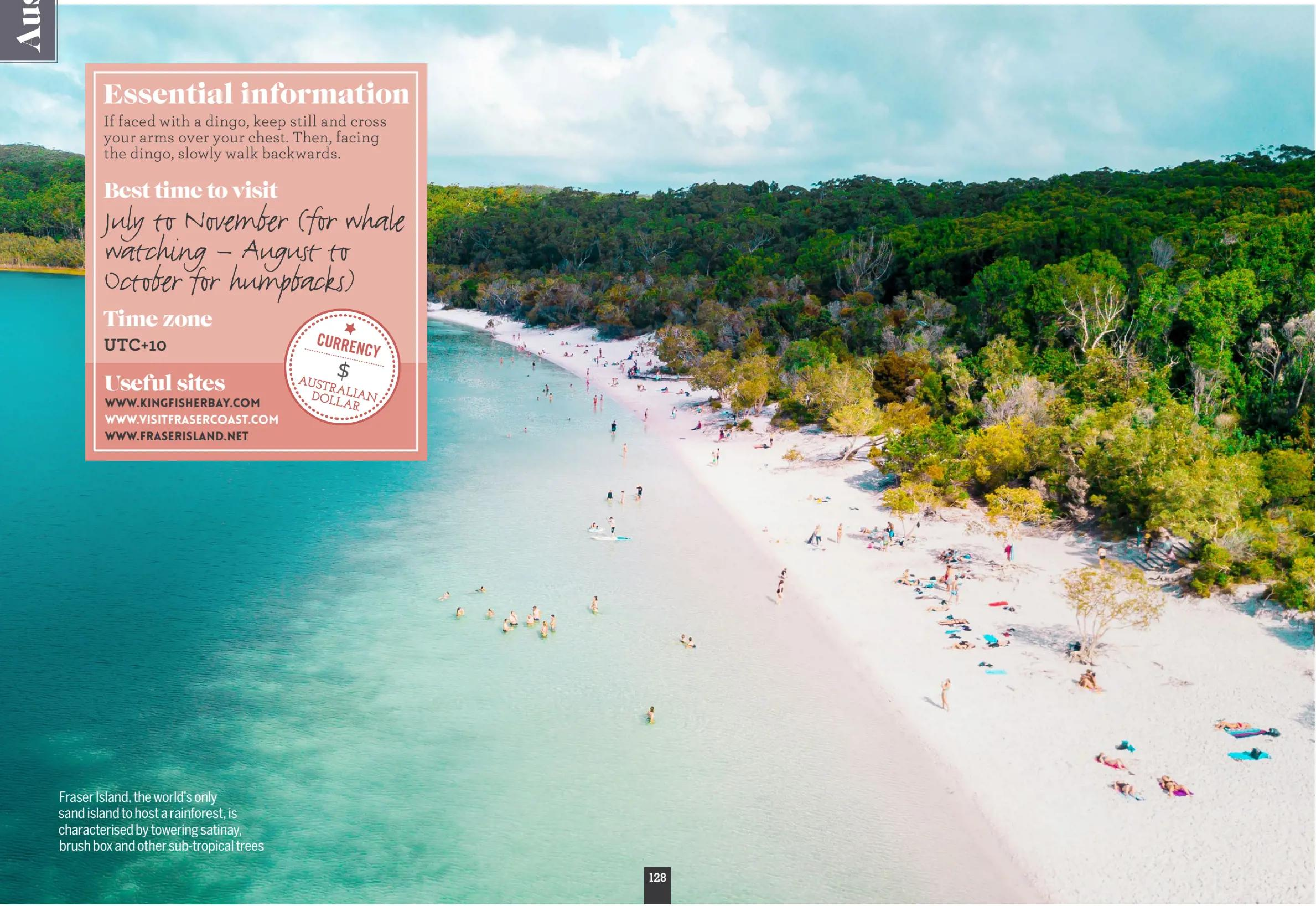
Time zone

UTC+10

CURRENCY
$
AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR

Useful sites

WWW.KINGFISHERBAY.COM
WWW.VISITFRASERCOAST.COM
WWW.FRASERISLAND.NET



Fraser Island, the world's only sand island to host a rainforest, is characterised by towering satinay, brush box and other sub-tropical trees

Used as a hospital ship in WWI, the SS Maheno was swept towards Fraser Island, en route to Japan for scrapping

Every year, humpback whales migrate from Antarctica to the eastern Australian coast to give birth

red to yellow, ushering in the wreck of the SS Maheno – an early turbine-driven steamer, which was swept away in 1935 while being dragged to Japan. It is just one of 23 ships to have been wrecked against Fraser Island between 1856 and 1935 – even after the construction of the island's northern Sandy Cape Lighthouse in 1870.

Further afield, Hammerstone Sandblow, one of the island's enormous, ever-shifting dunes, leads into Lake Wabby. The island's deepest lake is also an anomaly – both technically a window lake, which sits beneath water level, and a barrage lake – formed when the Hammerstone created a natural dam against a creek. It is also the island's only lake that supports aquatic life, but in the next century will most likely be swallowed by the dune that created it.

Altogether, the island's lakes are exceptional in size, diversity and age. Inland, Fraser's Lake McKenzie splits the rainforest, like an enormous oasis. The perched lake is fed not by groundwater but rainwater, sitting between dunes, atop the silky smooth white silica sand below – which not only filters the water crystal clear, but feels positively delightful beneath treading feet.

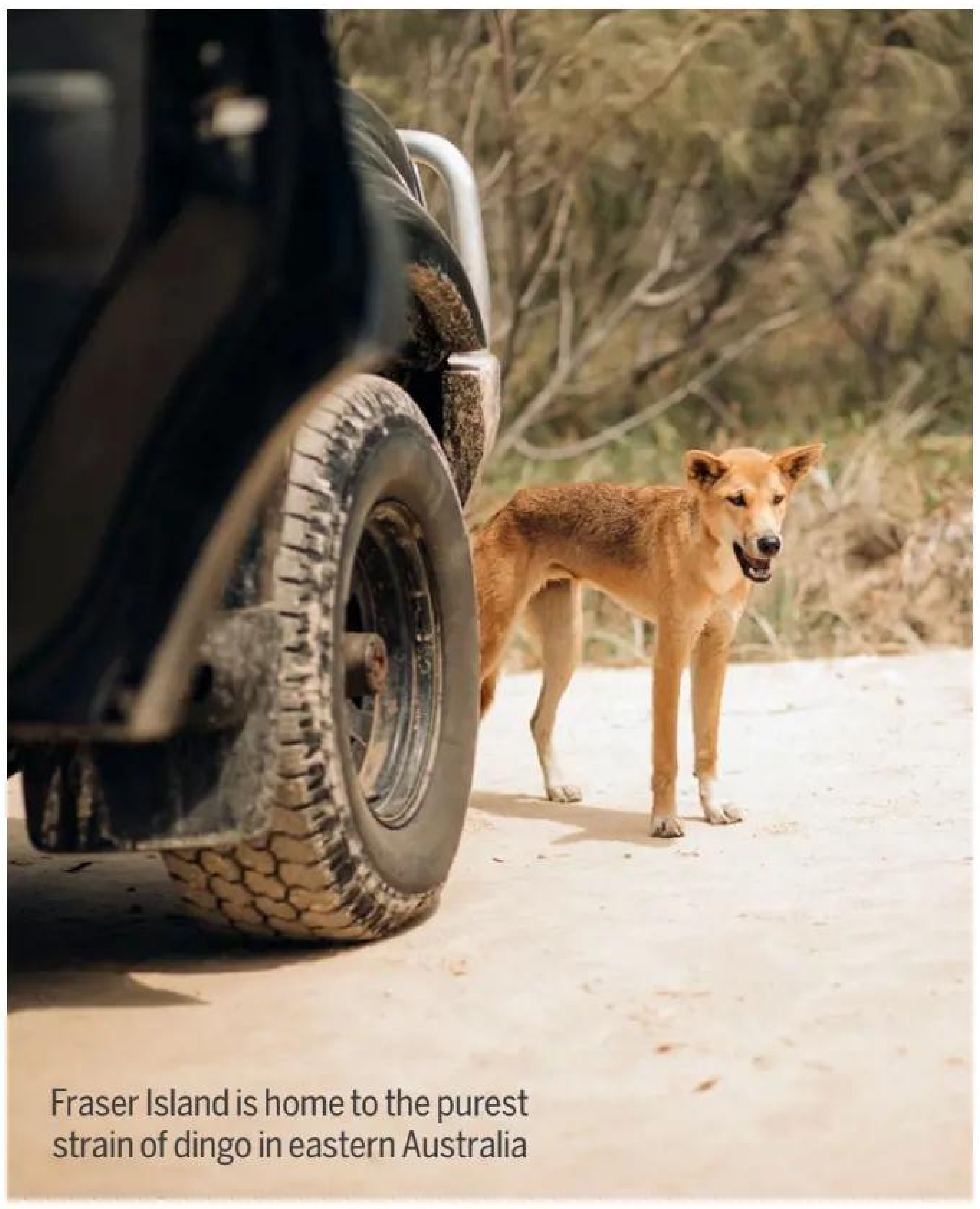
Lake Boomanjin is also a bizarre beast. Quieter than its counterparts, at 190 hectares (470 acres), it is both the world's largest perched lake, and the highest, 130 metres (427 feet) above sea level. However, not content to break records, Boomanjin also boasts a surreal gradient of reddish hues – tea tree red, to be precise – an effect created by stripping tannin from the surrounding tea trees.

The island's unusual landscapes have created a fittingly unfamiliar ecosystem, where the purest strain of eastern Australian dingoes call home. Roughly 50 mammals are spread across Fraser Island's rainforests, mangroves, swamps, woodlands, heaths and shorelines. They include the elusive swamp wallaby, which scurries amid the scant grass and the sheepish short-beaked echidna, with its long spines.

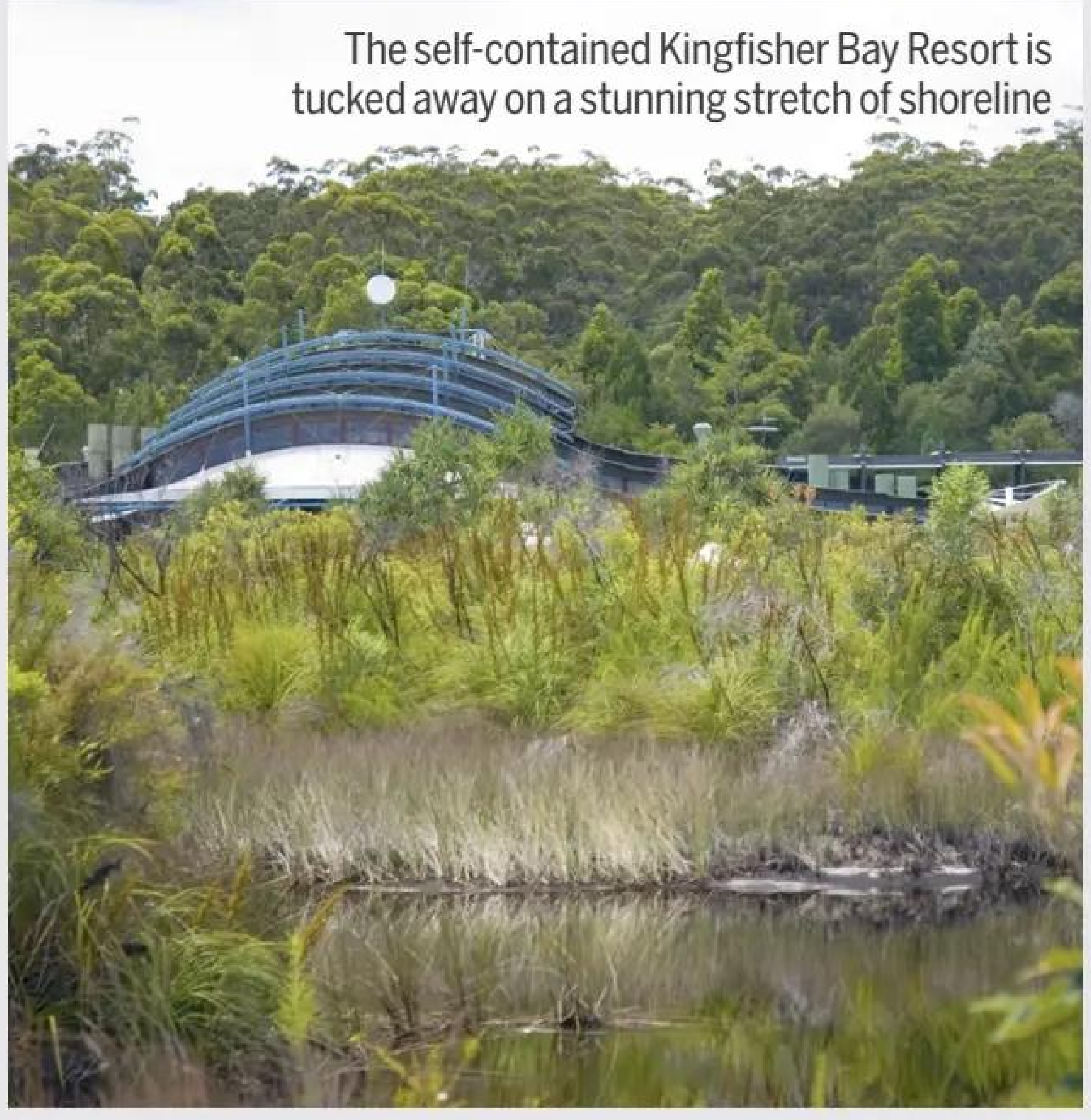
> THE ISLAND'S MOST IMMEDIATELY STAGGERING FEATURE IS ITS RAINFOREST

Come evening, visitors can go on an open-air tour of the island's all-night party critters, such as the black-and-white sugar glider, a tiny possum capable of crossing half a football pitch in one flight. The island also counts around 80 types of reptile among its population, including 20 species of snake, 'acid frogs' accustomed to acidic water, and sand and lace monitors, which tend to linger around picnic areas.

Aside from hundreds of bird species, the island is also perfectly positioned for whale-watching excursions, as migrating humpbacks flee the Antarctic to give birth in Australia's warmer waters. The only sight more delightful than humpback whales are humpback whales swimming alongside their calves – a shining example of life at the edge of the world.



Fraser Island is home to the purest strain of dingo in eastern Australia

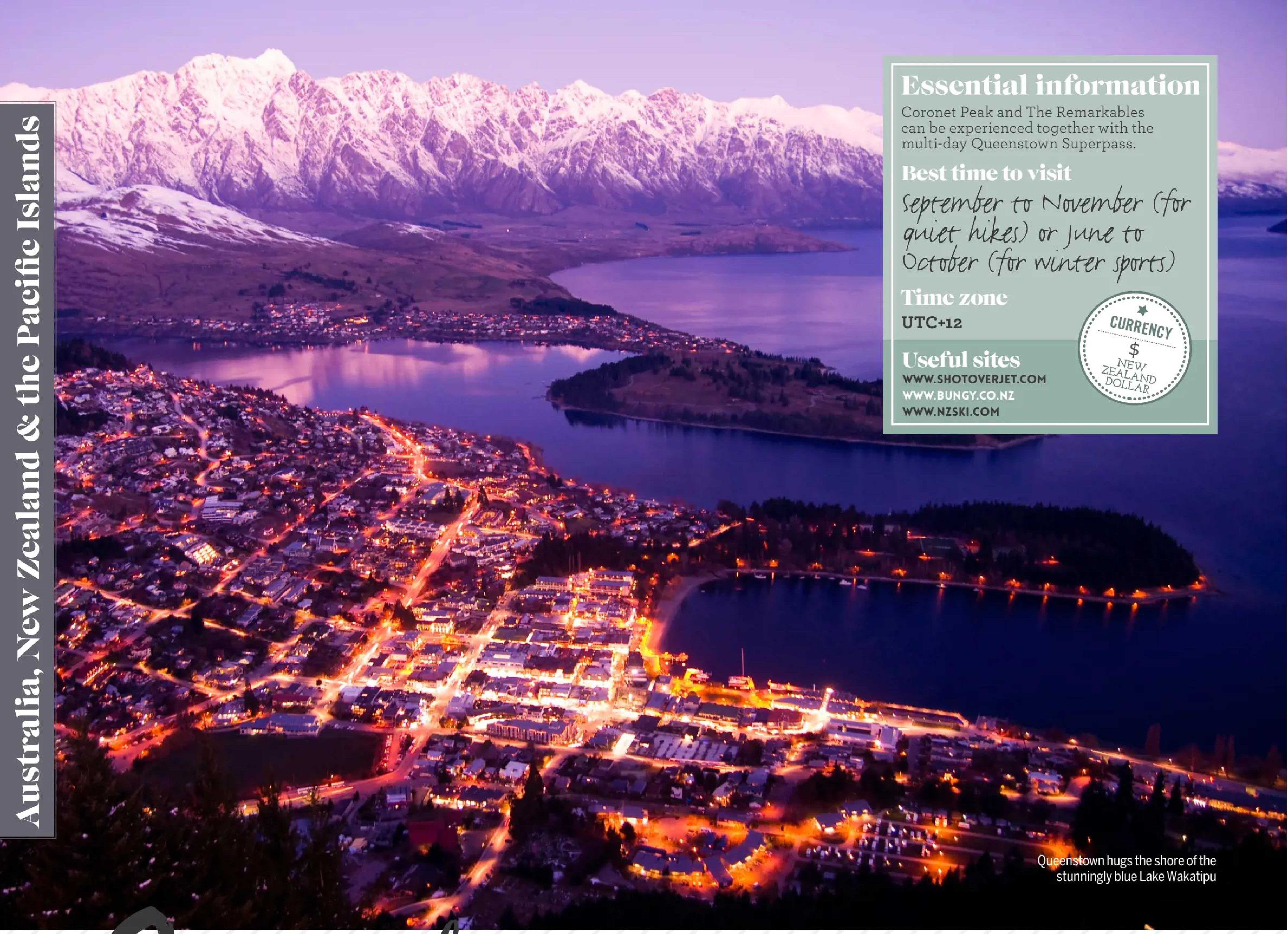


The self-contained Kingfisher Bay Resort is tucked away on a stunning stretch of shoreline

ACCOMMODATION

There is no one way to experience Fraser Island. The isle offers myriad options to rest your head, from camping beneath the stars to living it up at the Kingfisher Bay Resort. For backpackers and four-wheelers, campgrounds are scattered across the island – though not all of these allow campers to light fires, so packing a portable stove is a must. Luckily, from crockery to sleeping bags, essentials can be hired along with a 4WD. Camping packages even include the cost of permits.

While there are hotels available in Eurong and Happy Valley, none quite match up to Kingfisher Bay Resort, an ecotourist slice of paradise, offering everything from rooms to villas, with views of the sea and lagoons. Meanwhile, the timber Wilderness Lodges embed guests in the shade of gum trees and bush plants. Shared bedrooms strip back the frills, limited to an open-lounge, coin-laundry, pay-phone, kitchenette and a mask of mosquito screens.



Queenstown hugs the shore of the stunningly blue Lake Wakatipu

Essential information

Coronet Peak and The Remarkables can be experienced together with the multi-day Queenstown Superpass.

Best time to visit

September to November (for quiet hikes) or June to October (for winter sports)

Time zone

UTC+12

CURRENCY
$
NEW ZEALAND DOLLAR

Useful sites

WWW.SHOTOVERJET.COM
WWW.BUNGY.CO.NZ
WWW.NZSKI.COM

92

Queenstown

Rich in mountains, lakes and forests, Queenstown is New Zealand's capital of adventure

Tucked within New Zealand's Southern Alps, Queenstown hugs the shore of the stunningly blue Lake Wakatipu, whose distinctive shape creates a tide of sorts, rising and falling every 25 minutes. Maori folklore says that this is caused by the heartbeat of the monster, Matau, who sleeps beneath.

In the summer, the dramatic landscape of mountain, forest and lake is fair game for explorer and adrenaline-junkie alike. From the city centre, visitors can get a taste of the great outdoors with a 500-metre (1,640-foot) walk up the pine forests of Te Tapu-nui, or the 'mountain of intense sacredness'. Meanwhile, the slightly more challenging, three-hour Mt Crichton loop swoops through red beech, mountain beech and manuka trees. It takes trekkers back in time, past Twelve Mile Creek gorge, which once swarmed with prospectors and still bears a 1930s' hut and 'tail race' tunnel, which was used to carry gold-bearing gravel after it was knocked off the cliff.

One of the region's more memorable hikes, Ben Lomond, rises 1,438 metres (4,718 feet) up through alpine tussock and shrubs. Its summit boasts mesmerising panoramic views, with lake and mountain stretching as far as the eye can see. While the mountain can also be explored on horseback, it's best accessed from the top of the Skyline Gondola, which not only features a coffee shop with the best view in town, but an 800-metre (2,625-foot) downhill luge and regular stargazing sessions.

The thrilling landscape is a natural temple to the gods of adrenaline, and perhaps the greatest of all can be found in the Shotover Jet, an iconic red speedboat that throttles between the Shotover River Canyon. Zooming between stone and tree, the boat spins and soars, bursting between rocks and over shallow water.

New Zealand is also world famous for its bungee jumps (usually spelled 'bungy' in New Zealand), and Queenstown hosts Australasia's highest – the 134-metre (440-foot) Nevis Bungy, with a freefall of 8.5 seconds. If that's not quite exciting enough, couples and friends can try out the Nevis canyon swing, the world's largest.

Come June, the town becomes a winter wonderland, with perfectly powdery snow spread across four skiing areas. Popular resorts like Coronet Peak and The Remarkables feature meticulously curated and groomed trails catering to all difficulty levels, with views that would make Monet blush. Meanwhile, for the hardcore enthusiasts, Treble Cone is home to an array of long slopes and off-piste terrains to explore.

For a change of pace, or those averse to shock and awe, a day trip to the nearby park of Milford Sound is not only peaceful, but positively transformative. The deep blue fjord is embraced by steep cliffs and thick rainforest, best explored via cruise, kayak or even scuba. Home to dolphins, seals, penguins and the bizarre black coral, usually confined to the ocean's darkest depths, it is a nature-lover's paradise.

The best way to avoid a bumpy landing when coming back down to Earth is with a tasting of the region's Pinot Noir which, thanks to the cool weather and glacially derived soils, ranks among the world's finest.

Christmas Island

Paradise in the Indian Ocean, Christmas Island is a kaleidoscope of culture and natural beauty

Every day is a holiday on Christmas Island, a tiny speck of land that's no less exciting for its small size, located 2,600 kilometres (1,600 miles) northwest of Perth, Western Australia, and 500 kilometres (300 miles) south of Jakarta, the capital city of Indonesia. A territory of Australia, Christmas Island encompasses 135 square kilometres (52 square miles), and every nook is packed with another secret to be revealed, another adventure to be explored.

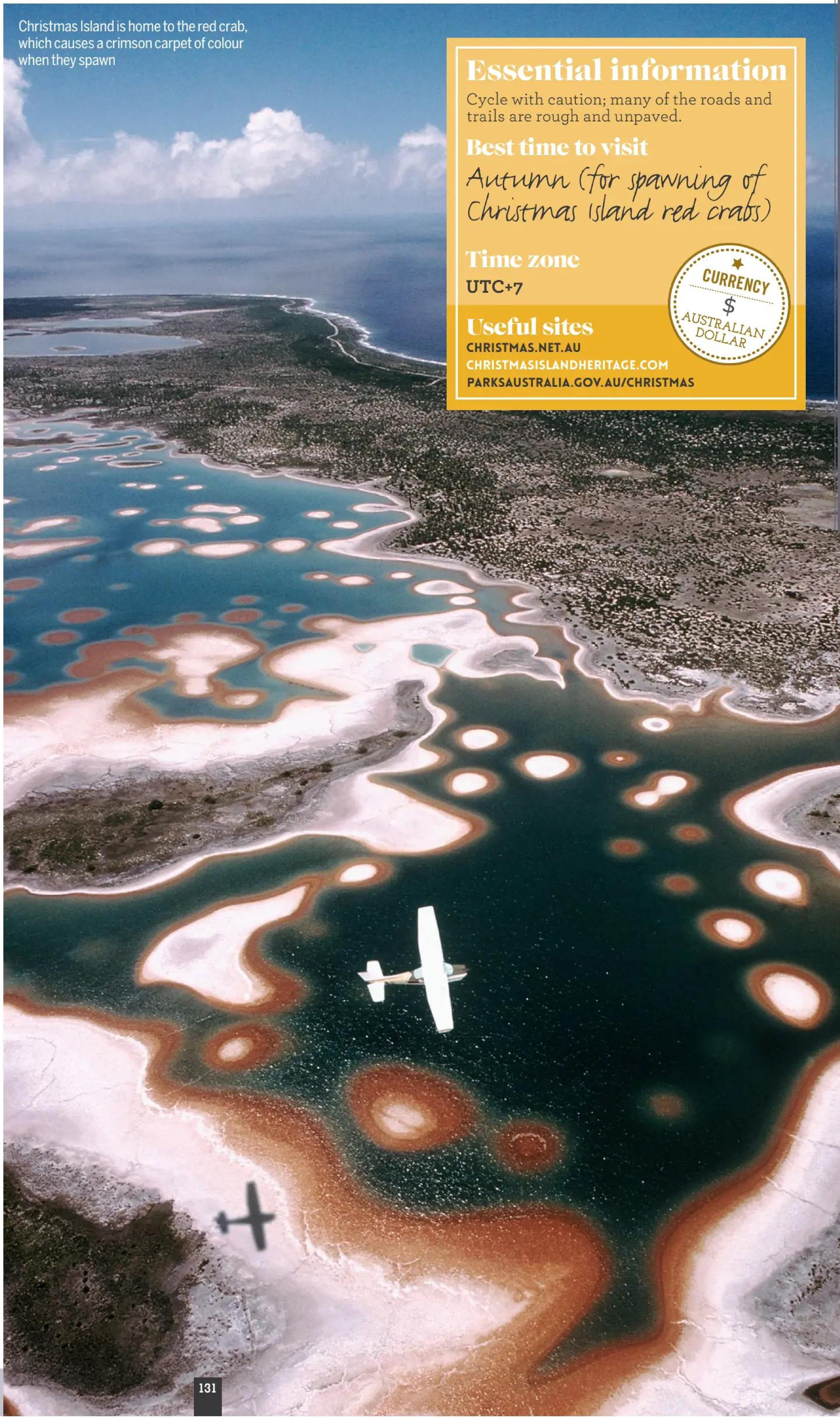
During the discovery of rich phosphate deposits found there in the 1880s, settlers from the West and from other areas of Asia came to Christmas Island, planting the seeds of a diverse cultural atmosphere that today gives the locale a flavour like no other place on Earth. While most of the inhabitants are of Chinese ancestry, there are Europeans and native islanders as well. With such diversity comes an appreciation for varied perspectives. Religious affiliations coexist tranquilly, while colourful traditions and a heritage of cooperation keep visitors enthralled during the many celebrations and festivals that occur annually. Christmas Island cuisine is a fusion of Western and Asian tastes to tantalise the palate with spice and verve, while the local architecture pays homage to wondrous variety.

While leaving Christmas Island is difficult to do once under its enchanting spell, getting there is relatively easy with regular airline services from Perth, Jakarta and the Malaysian capital city of Kuala Lumpur. A visa is required, but is usually easy to obtain with the assistance of a travel professional. From time to time, cruise ships sailing from Southeast Asia pay a call to the island as well. Residents live primarily in the 'settlement areas' at the northern end of Christmas Island, mostly at Flying Fish Cove (also called Kampong locally), Drumsite, Silver City and Poon Saan. The Christmas Island Tourism Association operates a visitor centre in the settlement area, a good place to plan excursions and develop an itinerary.

Popular pastimes on Christmas Island, in addition to taking in the sights and sounds of the local people, include guided photography safaris. Visitors aim to capture images of exotic birds, beautiful jungle and beach scenery, and stunning wildlife. The Christmas Island red crab is the best known of the indigenous species, and millions are active across the island, particularly during the autumn months as they prepare to spawn. The carpet of crimson at that time is an unforgettable sight.

Day tours of Christmas Island are a popular option, and snorkelling and diving are common for observing the abundant marine life, particularly at Flying Fish Cove. A visit to The Blowholes or The Grotto a short distance away is not to be missed. Some beaches require a four-wheel drive vehicle for access. Outdoor sports enthusiasts can find some of the world's best fishing, angling for sailfish, wahoo and tuna surprisingly close to the shoreline. Exploring on foot, mountain bike or car, visitors may experience the entire island, with the understanding that 63 per cent of the land is preserved as a stunning National Park.

Hotels are plentiful and range from economical lodges or rental rooms to luxury resorts with astounding views of the island. Prices for any commodity on Christmas Island may be higher due to transportation costs, however, restaurants serve local produce when available.



Christmas Island is home to the red crab, which causes a crimson carpet of colour when they spawn

Essential information

Cycle with caution; many of the roads and trails are rough and unpaved.

Best time to visit

Autumn (for spawning of Christmas Island red crabs)

Time zone

UTC+7

Currency

$

Australian Dollar

Useful sites

CHRISTMAS.NET.AU
CHRISTMASISLANDHERITAGE.COM
PARKSAUSTRALIA.GOV.AU/CHRISTMAS

Sydney

No trip Down Under is complete without a visit to Australia's multicultural metropolis

Why settle for having to choose between a city break and a beach holiday when you can enjoy both? Sydney's bustling centre offers a diverse variety of cultural attractions, with a choice of stunning golden beaches just a stone's throw away. It's not difficult to see why more than ten million tourists visit Australia's largest city every year.

One of the best ways to get acquainted with Sydney is to take a walking tour. The I'm Free Walking Tours are led by local guides (easily spotted in their bright-green shirts) who explain the stories behind the city's major sights, and can give you plenty of tips on where to visit, eat and drink during your stay. Although the tours are free, be sure to tip your guide at the end.

Think of Sydney, and the eponymous Opera House immediately springs to mind. Join one of the daily tours to learn more about this unique building's history, or go behind the scenes with a backstage tour to explore parts of the Sydney Opera House that aren't otherwise open to the public. For an unforgettable evening, you could book to watch one of the many performances that take to the Sydney Opera House stage each year. Don't worry if opera's not your cup of tea – there are all kinds of performances to enjoy, including music, theatre, dance, comedy, circus, cabaret and many more. When planning your trip, be sure to check out the upcoming schedule.

Sydney has plenty of other cultural hotspots to visit. The city's galleries display works of the Old Masters as well as modern, contemporary and indigenous art. Admire the marvellous architecture of the Queen Victoria Building; originally constructed in the 1890s but restored in the 1980s, today it is home to some of Sydney's finest boutiques. Museums across the city host fascinating exhibits where you can learn more about Sydney's history, the natural world, science and technology, and more. In particular, the Australian Museum is the country's oldest, specialising in natural history and anthropology. Its dinosaur exhibition is a guaranteed hit with visitors of all ages.

The city also has a fantastic foodie scene, with a wide variety of restaurants, bars and cafés. Sydney's multicultural character is reflected in its food, and you'll find flavour influences and fusion cuisine from all over the world. Whether you want a quick bite or a three-course gourmet meal, there will be plenty of choice, no matter what your tastes or budget.

As with many major tourist hubs, Sydney's hop-on hop-off bus tour is a convenient way to see all the city's main sights for a reasonable price. A ticket will give you access to two routes: one that circulates the city and another that heads out to Bondi Beach. Both tours include optional pre-recorded audio guides that you can tune into to learn more about the sights you're passing. 24- and 48-hour tickets are available and, depending on how many of the tours' locations you're keen to see, they may save you having to pay for taxis or other public transport during your stay.

Being a harbour city, another great way to explore Sydney is from the water. Take an exhilarating jet-boat ride, paddle around the waterfront in a kayak, or enjoy a luxury cruise.

SYDNEY OFFERS A DIVERSE VARIETY OF CULTURAL ATTRACTIONS

Enjoy the golden sands and crystal-clear waters of Sydney's many beaches

Many popular destinations around Sydney and its suburbs can be reached by ferry from Circular Quay. Head to Darling Harbour for some retail therapy, or hop on a boat to Taronga Zoo and visit more than 4,000 native and exotic animals.

To soak up some of Sydney's reliable sunshine, many of its beautiful beaches are easy to reach by ferry. One of the most popular spots for sunbathing, surfing and snorkelling is Manly. Learn to ride the waves with lessons at Manly Surf School, or hire a snorkel at the Cabbage Tree Bay Aquatic Reserve for some up-close encounters with the local marine wildlife.

You can also get a ferry to Watsons Bay, where Camp Cove offers a little more peace and quiet than the more popular beaches. From here you can embark on a picturesque walk along the South Head Heritage Trail up to the candy-striped Hornby Lighthouse, where you can admire Sydney Harbour to the east and the Pacific Ocean to the west. If you're lucky, you may even be able to spot migrating whales between June and September.

By far the most famous stretch of sand in Sydney, if not all of Australia, is Bondi Beach. It's a popular spot in summer, particularly in the areas close to the bus stops, so head to the northern end of the beach to enjoy a little more space. Campbell Parade has plenty of cafés and restaurants overlooking Bondi where you can get refreshments and watch the world go by.

While staying in Sydney, make sure you take time to venture out of the city to visit the Blue Mountains, a World Heritage Area about two hours away. The region gets its name from the distinctive azure haze that envelops the mountains and forests here, making for some

Head out of the city to discover the stunning natural beauty of the Blue Mountains

You'll fall in love with Sydney's laid-back atmosphere and vibrant culture

Essential information

Book in advance to see a show at the Opera House or perform a BridgeClimb.

Best time to visit

September to November (for warm weather but fewer crowds)

Time zone

UTC+10

CURRENCY

$ AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR

Useful sites

SYDNEY.COM
SYDNEYEXPERT.COM
CITYOFSYDNEY.NSW.GOV.AU

spectacular scenery. There are many clifftop vantage points and walking paths to explore, and even a glass-bottomed cable car that travels across the valley. For adrenaline junkies there are plenty of more adventurous activities to enjoy in the area, including rock climbing, mountain biking and skydiving. There's even white water rafting, canoeing and kayaking on offer at Penrith Whitewater Stadium (the course built for the 2000 Sydney Olympics), located at the foot of the mountains.

Sydney's position on the southeast coast mostly protects it from the extreme heat and tropical storms that affect other parts of Australia. Winters are typically mild and summers are reliably warm to hot, so it's a great year-round destination.

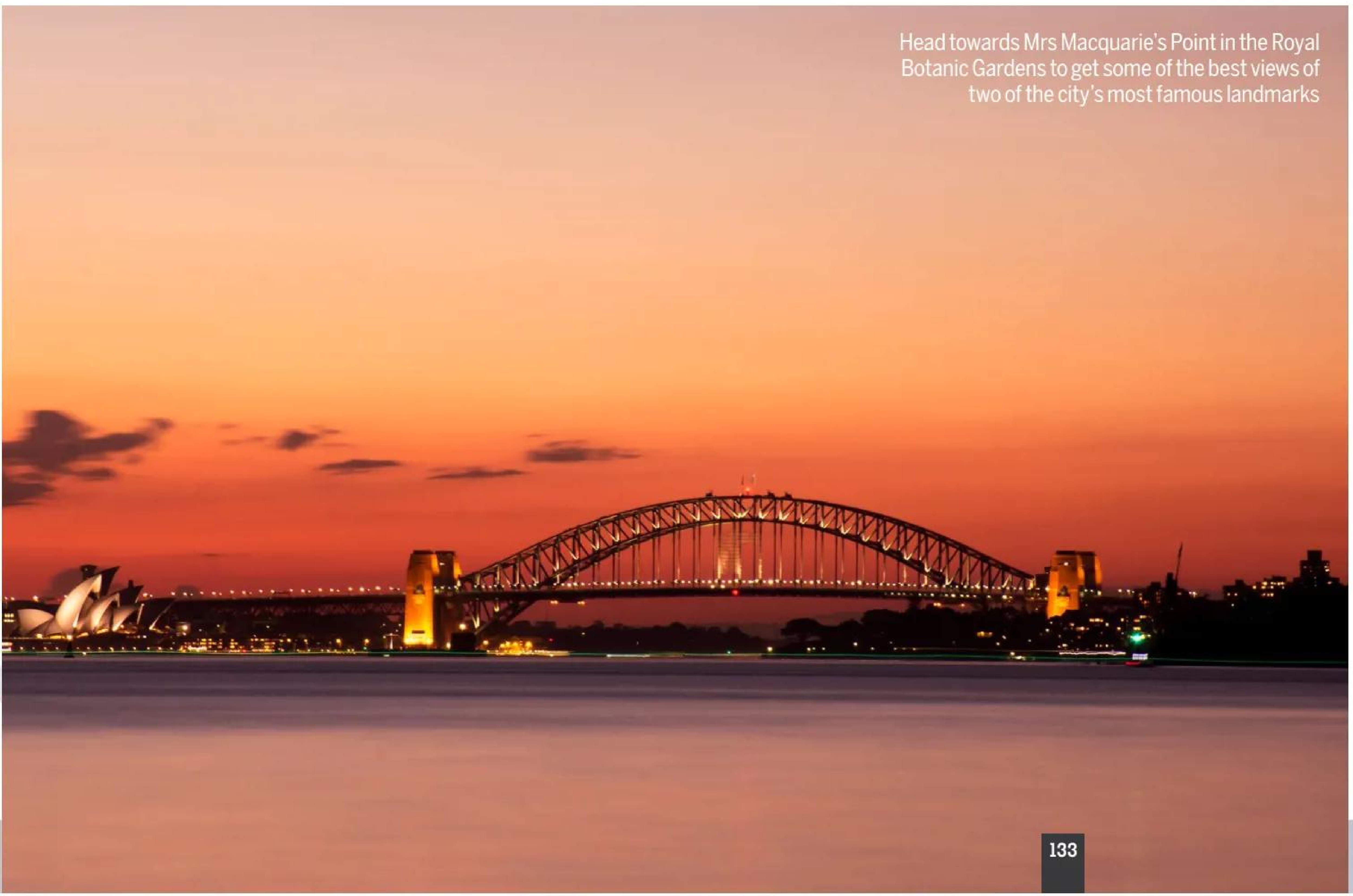
Don't forget to consider special events when planning your trip too – the Sydney Festival is scheduled for January 2020, and the stunning Vivid Sydney festival of light, music and ideas takes place in May and June each year. Of course, the city's New Year's Eve celebrations are among the best in the world, but be sure to book your activities and accommodation well in advance for that.

BRIDGECLIMB SYDNEY

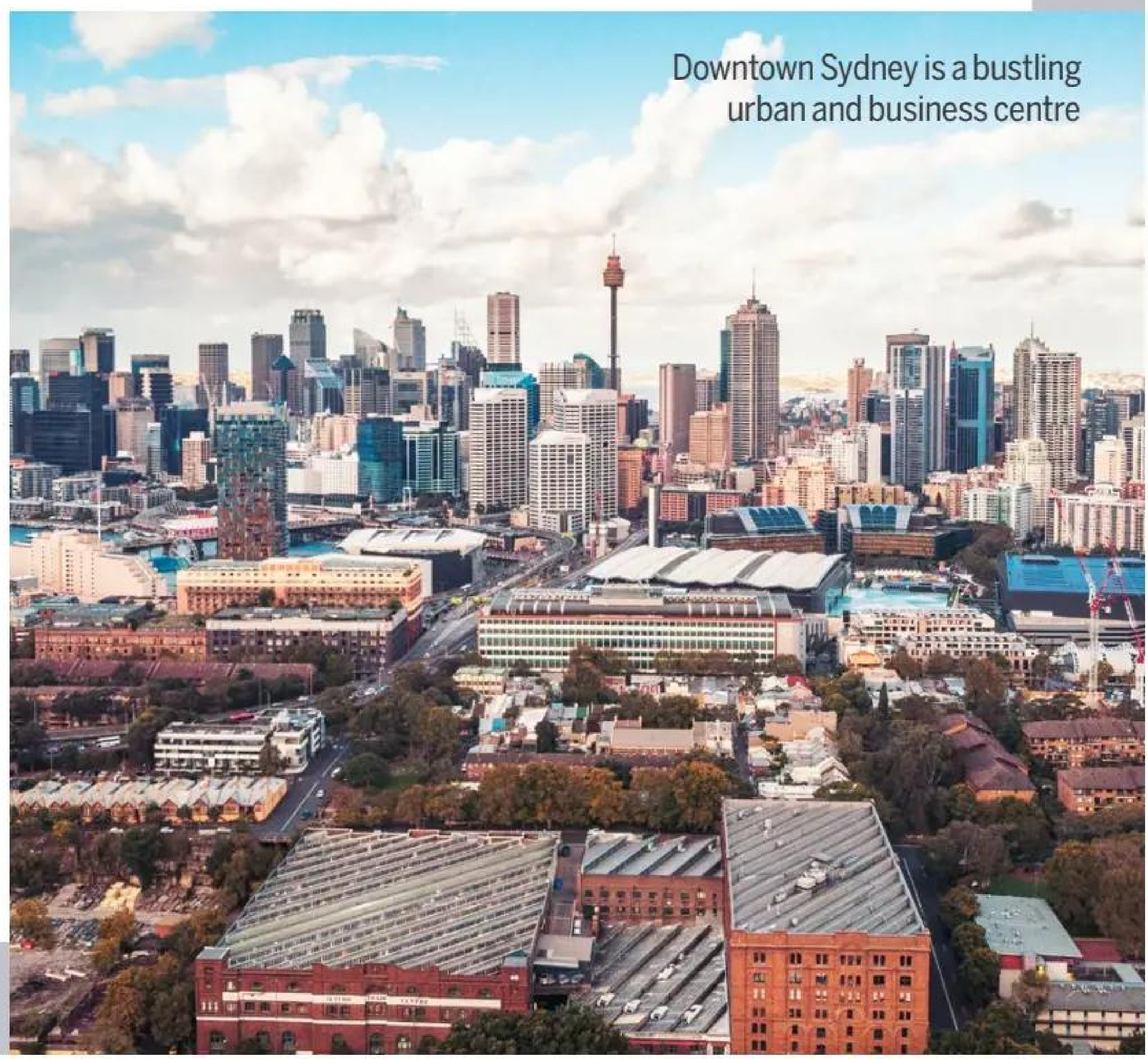
For a unique and unforgettable experience, why not scale the Sydney Harbour Bridge? BridgeClimb Sydney offers guided climbs across the steel arches up to a vantage point at the summit, where you can enjoy unrivalled panoramic views of the harbour. During the climb, your guide will tell you all about the bridge's fascinating history and take souvenir photos for you.

As well as the standard BridgeClimb, the company also offers an Express option – which takes a different route for a faster tour – and a Sampler option that goes halfway up via the inner arch, ideal for those who may be unsure of heights.

You can also book tours specifically for dawn, twilight and at night to see the bridge and the city in a totally different light. To make the climb extra special, BridgeClimb will even help you organise birthday parties, proposals or weddings at the summit. For more information visit bridgeclimb.com.



Head towards Mrs Macquarie's Point in the Royal Botanic Gardens to get some of the best views of two of the city's most famous landmarks



Downtown Sydney is a bustling urban and business centre

Cairns

Australia's tropical oasis is your perfect gateway to some of the most stunning scenery on the planet

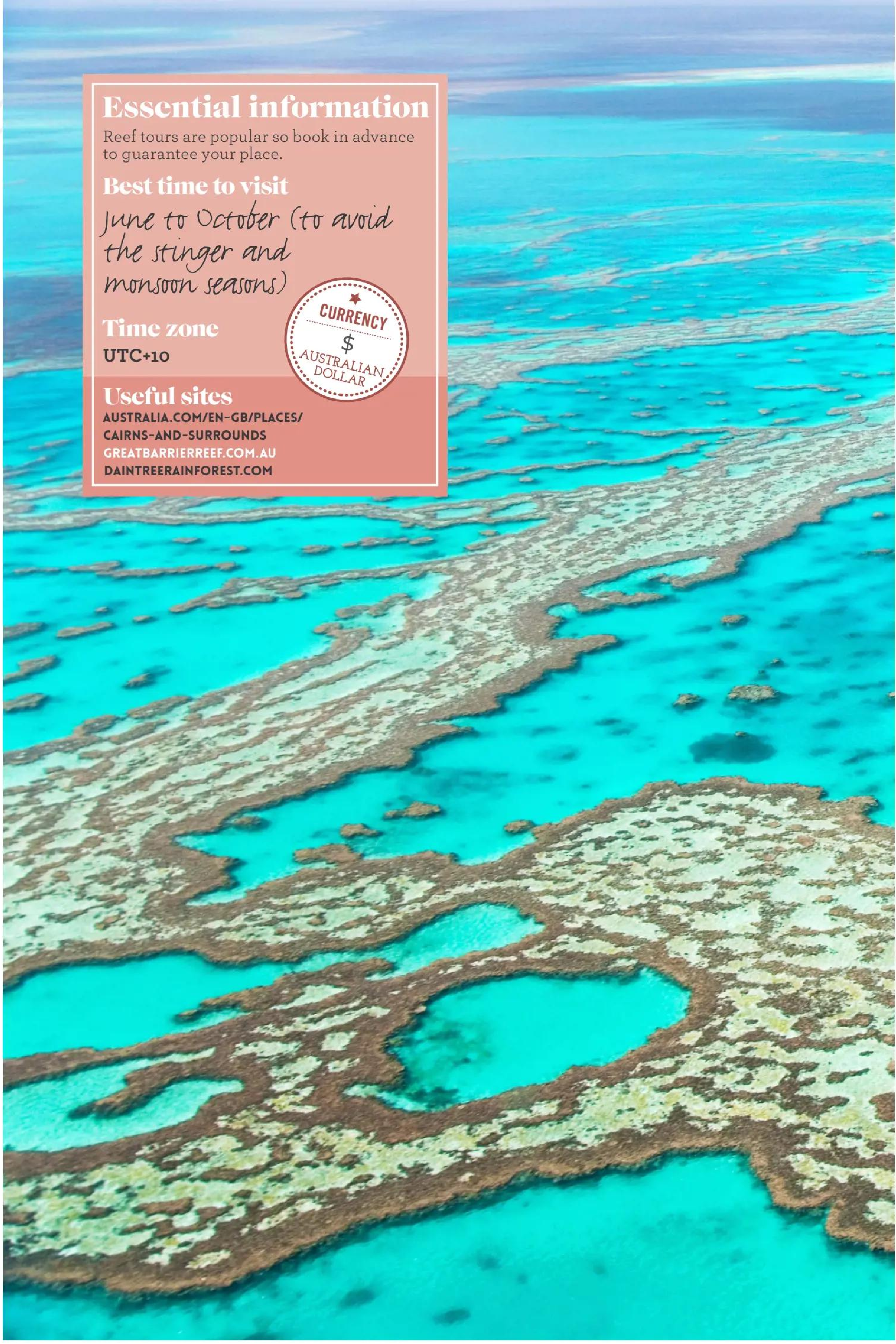
Sitting on the northeast coast, Cairns is uniquely positioned next to not one but two UNESCO World Heritage Sites: the Great Barrier Reef and the Wet Tropics of Queensland. A visit to this part of the world is best spent getting out and exploring the reefs, rainforests, beaches and tropical islands.

Many of the two million annual visitors only make a brief one- or two-night stop in the city to go on tour of the Great Barrier Reef, but linger a while longer and you can experience more of what the nature capital of Australia has to offer.

As one of the Seven Natural Wonders of the World, it's no surprise that the Great Barrier Reef is the most popular attraction for visitors to Cairns. These crystal-clear turquoise waters contain 3,000 individual reefs and hundreds of islands and coral cays, and are home to thousands of fascinating animal species. A variety of tours and activities cater for different reef experiences – from helicopter tours to view the marvel from above, to scuba diving lessons to meet some of the reef's residents up close.

Lush, tropical rainforests don't immediately spring to mind when you think of Australia. But this is a country the size of a small continent – it's not all outback and coastal cities. The rainforests stretching along Australia's northeast coast form the Wet Tropics of Queensland, which are a prehistoric relic of what Australia was like millions of years ago, and many of the country's native species evolved there. It's easy to see why this otherworldly environment is said to have inspired the alien forests of Pandora in the blockbuster movie *Avatar*.

The Great Barrier Reef is home to thousands of different species. You can meet some of them face-to-face on a dive



Essential information

Reef tours are popular so book in advance to guarantee your place.

Best time to visit

June to October (to avoid the stinger and monsoon seasons)

Time zone

UTC+10

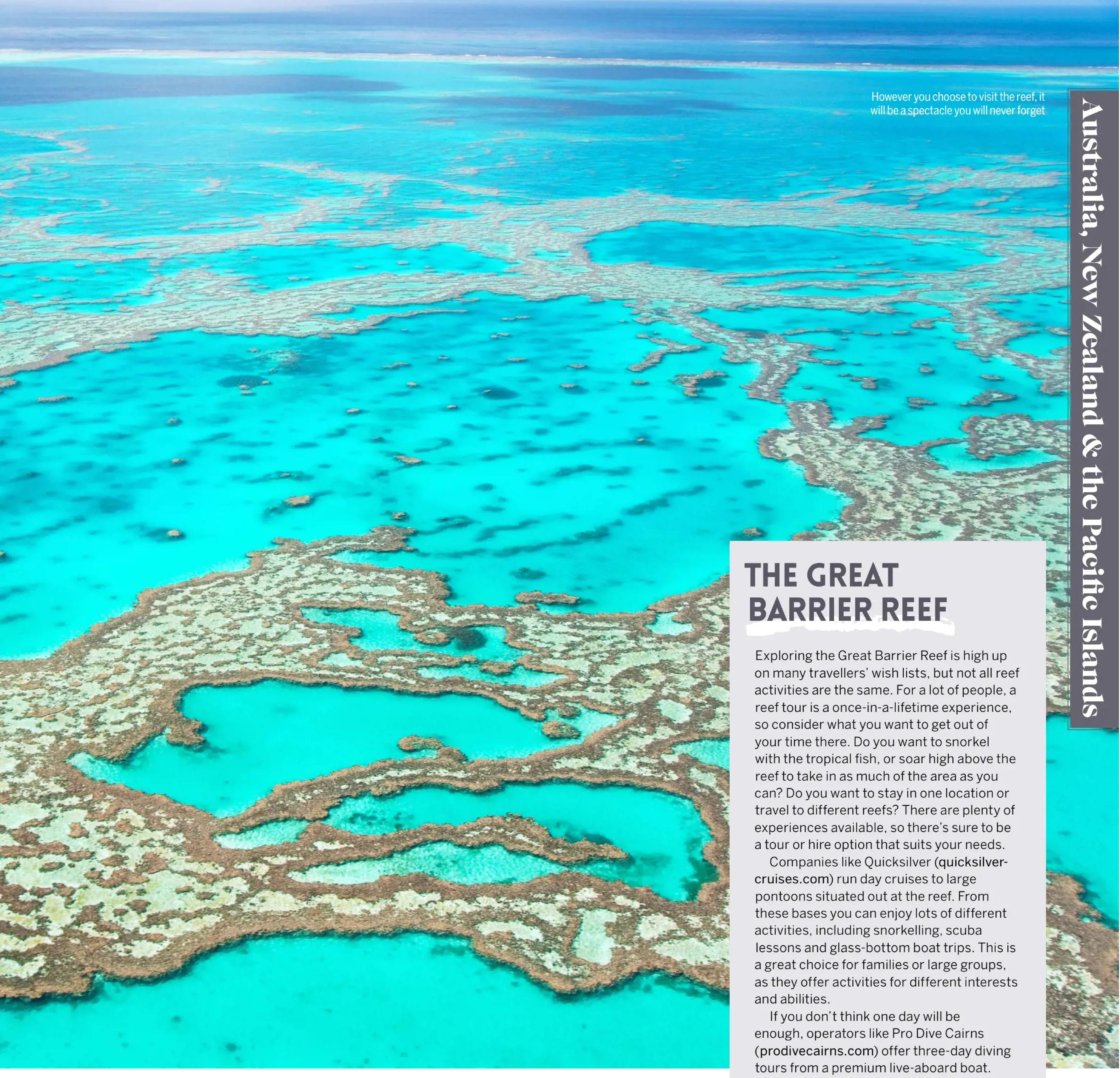
CURRENCY
$
AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR

Useful sites

AUSTRALIA.COM/EN-GB/PLACES/CAIRNS-AND-SURROUNDS
GREATBARRIERREEF.COM.AU
DAINTREERAINFOREST.COM

Tour operators run guided trips from Cairns and Port Douglas out to the neighbouring national parks, but you can also hire a car and follow your own itinerary. A two-hour drive north of Cairns takes you deep into Daintree, Australia's largest tropical rainforest. It's one of the most biodiverse ecosystems on the planet, so you can expect to see a huge variety of rare and unique flora and fauna during your visit, including the primitive 'idiot fruit' and magnificent, endangered cassowaries. The spectacular scenery is something to behold, ranging from the dense jungle, rivers, waterfalls and gorges down to idyllic beaches and coastal reefs.

Another must-see destination during your stay in Cairns is the Kuranda rainforest. You can reach Kuranda in just 30 minutes by car, but in this instance the scenic route is highly recommended and well worth the extra time. From Cairns Station on Bunda Street, take the Kuranda Scenic Railway, which winds its way to Kuranda Village via the picturesque Barron Gorge National Park. Along the way you will pass stunning mountains, ravines and waterfalls from the comfort and style of the train's elegant old-fashioned timber carriages. Upgrade to Gold Class tickets for a little luxury, including a host service, welcome drinks and a morning or afternoon tea.



However you choose to visit the reef, it will be a spectacle you will never forget

In Kuranda you can explore the town's renowned marketplaces. Kuranda Original Rainforest Markets on Therwin Street was originally established in the 1970s for the local community to sell arts and crafts. Today it's a hive of colourful stalls offering a selection of trinkets, clothing and food. There's a focus on eco-friendly products, so many items are made from organic or recycled materials. Across the street, the Kuranda Heritage Markets sell an assortment of arts and crafts, souvenirs and clothing, including handmade Aboriginal items.

From here, you can also get up close with some of Australia's most iconic and rare wildlife at the nearby wildlife centres. Meet koalas, kangaroos, wallabies and many more native

THE SPECTACULAR SCENERY IS SOMETHING TO BEHOLD

THE GREAT BARRIER REEF

Exploring the Great Barrier Reef is high up on many travellers' wish lists, but not all reef activities are the same. For a lot of people, a reef tour is a once-in-a-lifetime experience, so consider what you want to get out of your time there. Do you want to snorkel with the tropical fish, or soar high above the reef to take in as much of the area as you can? Do you want to stay in one location or travel to different reefs? There are plenty of experiences available, so there's sure to be a tour or hire option that suits your needs.

Companies like Quicksilver (**quicksilver-cruises.com**) run day cruises to large pontoons situated out at the reef. From these bases you can enjoy lots of different activities, including snorkelling, scuba lessons and glass-bottom boat trips. This is a great choice for families or large groups, as they offer activities for different interests and abilities.

If you don't think one day will be enough, operators like Pro Dive Cairns (**prodivecairns.com**) offer three-day diving tours from a premium live-aboard boat. These give you the opportunity to visit different parts of the reef and at different times of day, offering a completely different experience each time.

Another way to see this natural wonder is from above. Scenic helicopter and seaplane tours give unparalleled views of the network of reefs, providing a true sense of their scale and diversity.

However you choose to see the reef, conservation of this unique ecosystem is incredibly important. Make sure you pick a high-standard tour operator and – particularly if you're planning a self-guided tour – obey the Responsible Reef Practices outlined by the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park Authority (**gbrmpa.gov.au**).

95

Cairns has a fantastic selection of restaurants, cafés and bars. Fresh seafood is a particular speciality

species at the Kuranda Koala Gardens. Find yourself surrounded by more than 1,500 tropical butterflies at the Australian Butterfly Sanctuary, and join some of the world's rarest tropical birds in their rainforest habitat at Birdworld Kuranda.

Another way to experience the beauty of the rainforest is from above. You can take the Skyrail gondolas, which glide over the canopy and down into the jungle between Kuranda and Smithfield. A one-way trip takes 90 minutes, including stops at Barron Falls and Red Peak where you can take in the sights from viewing platforms and go on ranger-guided boardwalk tours to learn more about Kuranda's fascinating natural history. Upgrade to a 'Diamond View' glass-bottom gondola to get a bird's-eye view of the rainforest below. Or, for the ultimate Skyrail adventure, choose the 'Canopy Glider' experience – an open-air gondola accompanied by an expert guide to provide a unique insight into Kuranda's vibrant ecosystem.

The Cairns region has been home to Aboriginal inhabitants for tens of thousands of years. One of the best places to learn more about Australia's indigenous history is the Tjapukai Aboriginal Cultural Park, which is next to the Smithfield Skyrail station and just a 15-minute drive from Cairns. The park's Tjapukai Cultural Centre hosts exhibits, galleries and performances to share the history and customs of the local Djabugay people. With Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as your guides, you can learn about traditional hunting and foraging, dances, songs and crafts.

If an island getaway is what you're after, Fitzroy Island is a secluded tropical paradise just 45 minutes away from Cairns by boat. The island is open to day-trippers, but you can also book to stay at the luxury four-star Fitzroy Island Resort, or reserve a spot at the nearby campsites.

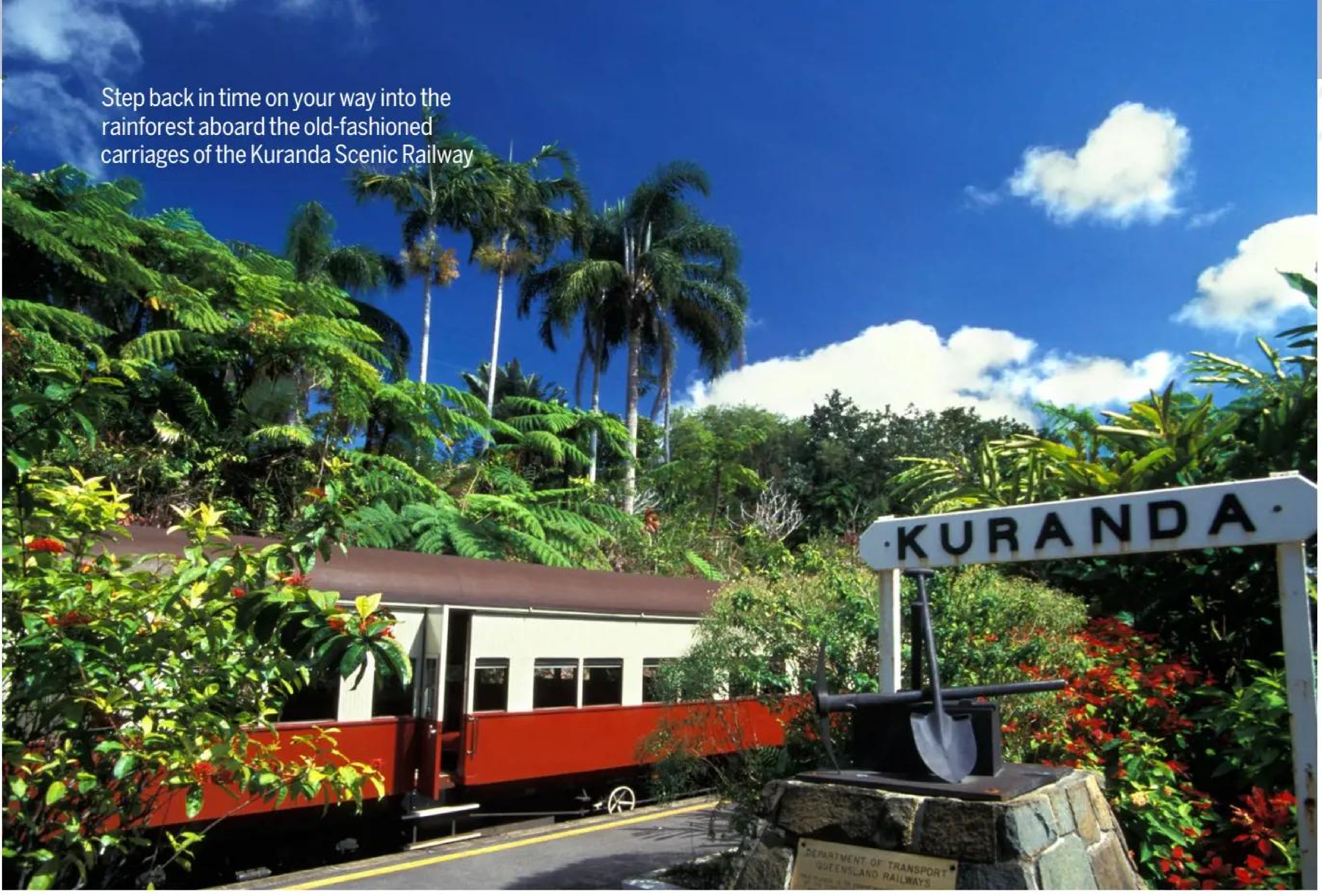
Most of the 339-hectare (838-acre) island is a protected National Park, but there are walking paths for visitors heading from the main resort up to the old lighthouse, and in the opposite direction towards the beaches. The island is surrounded by parts of the Great Barrier Reef, so you can go snorkelling or diving straight from the island rather than relying on boats or pontoons. What's more, Fitzroy's Nudey Beach was ranked first in Australia's 101 Best Beaches 2018.

When you're not exploring the natural wonders around Cairns, take some time to unwind in the laid-back city itself. The three-kilometre (two-mile) Esplanade is a popular place for a stroll and to relax along the seafront. Enjoy a meal al fresco overlooking the gardens and ocean from one of the Esplanade's many restaurants or cafés. In the parklands you can have a picnic or a barbecue, join a free fitness class, or swim and sunbathe at the city's famous man-made lagoon.

The Esplanade Lagoon contains crystal-clear waters filtered from the ocean inlet that it overlooks. The lagoon is surrounded by white sands and the shade of palms, and is patrolled by lifeguards to provide a safe place to paddle and swim. The lagoon is free to use and open every day; it's a great place to cool off in the summer heat and meet fellow travellers.

With all the activities and excursions Cairns has to offer, you are bound to work up an appetite. Seafood, international and fusion cuisine are particular specialities in the area, and a huge choice of restaurants cater for every budget. The vast majority of venues in the city are casual, but bear in mind that some higher-end restaurants may have dress codes (no flip-flops, for example), so check before you head out. For lighter bites, Cairns has a buzzing café scene where you can enjoy a range of snacks, salads and pastries, or cool off with an iced coffee.

Fitzroy Island is home to Nudey Beach, one of the best in all Australia



Step back in time on your way into the rainforest aboard the old-fashioned carriages of the Kuranda Scenic Railway

Meet some of Australia's iconic animals at the Kuranda Koala Gardens

Cairns is home to one of the most exciting marketplaces in the world: Rusty's Markets. From Friday to Sunday each week, join the buzzing local crowds to browse the 180-plus stalls offering a fantastic selection of fresh, local produce, bric-a-brac and speciality goods. From fruit to flowers, cheeses to chocolate, and coffee to clothes, all at very affordable prices, you'll be hard pressed to leave empty handed. All the delicious produce on show is bound to make you hungry, but there are food stands in the market's eatery where you can grab a quick snack or drink, including crêpes, fresh juices, noodles and more. You can pick up some bargains if you visit on a Sunday afternoon, as vendors often drop their prices to sell off any remaining stock.

A popular day-trip destination from Cairns is the small town of Port Douglas, which itself is another hub for visitors heading to the Great Barrier Reef and the region's rainforests. Port Douglas is about an hour north of Cairns along the picturesque coastal road of Captain Cook Highway. It's home to several spas, golf courses and four- and five-star resorts, several of which are located next to the stunning Four Mile Beach. As its name suggests, its sands stretch almost as far as the eye can see, perfect for a long walk. Like Cairns, Port Douglas also has a thriving foodie scene, with plenty of restaurants, bars and cafés to suit your appetite, whether you're after coffee and a pastry, or a fine-dining experience overlooking the waterfront.

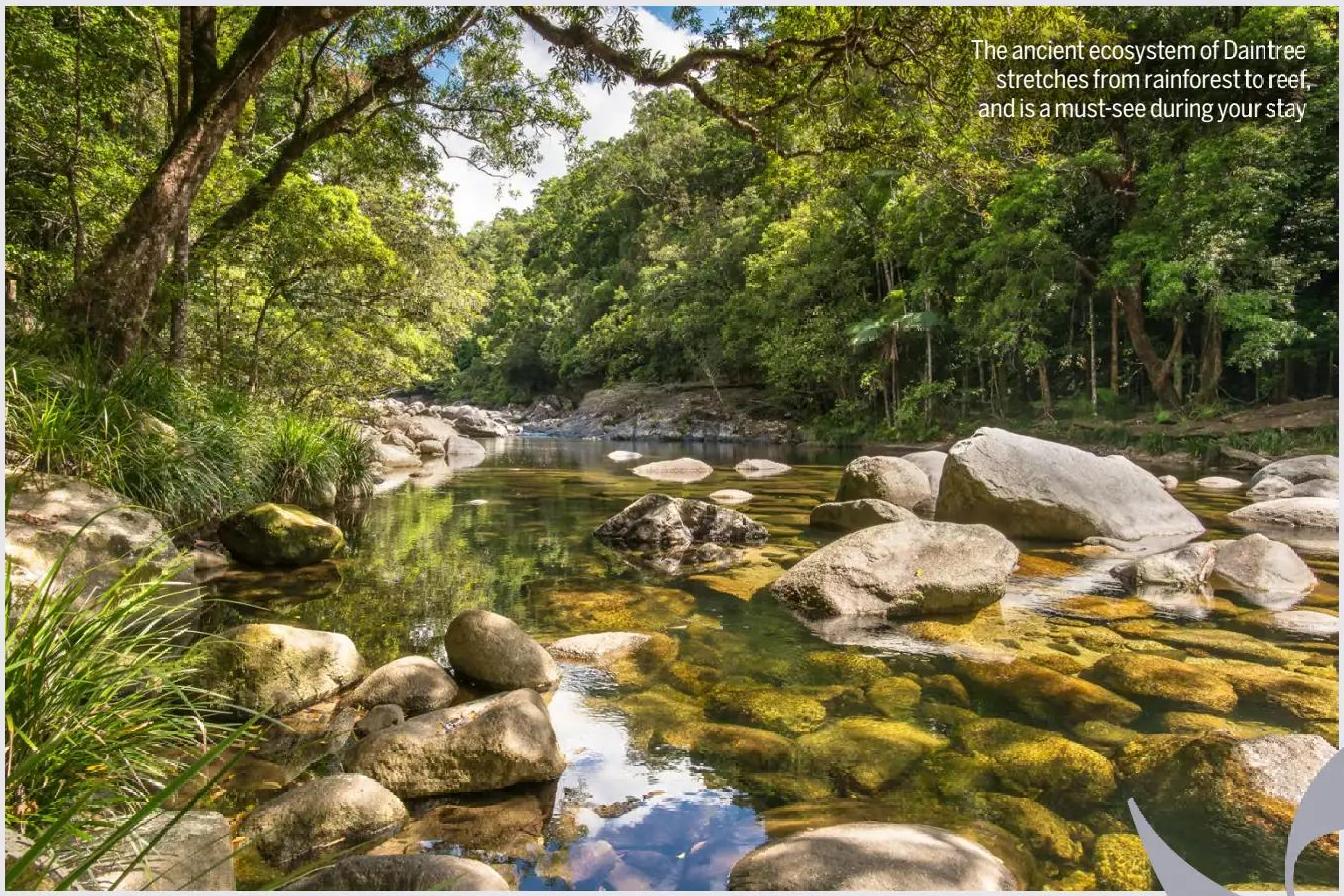
There are a few factors worth considering as you decide when to visit Cairns. The northern coastlines lie well within the tropics, and as such enjoy wet and dry seasons. The tropical climate means summers (December to February) are generally hot and humid, and winters (June to August) are fairly warm and dry. February and March have the highest rainfall on average, while July, August and September are typically the driest. Winter is more popular with tourists, so attractions are inevitably busier, and accommodation and flights may be more expensive at that time.

Besides the weather, one thing to bear in mind is that November to May is 'stinger season', when there are more jellyfish in the coastal waters. Fully-body 'stinger suits' provide good protection against most marine stingers, and can be hired for a reasonable price. Many beaches have stinger nets to keep jellyfish out, but it's still a good idea to wear a suit as a precaution. Most reef tour operators will provide them at no extra cost, although the risk of stingers out at the reef is lower than it is at the shore. This doesn't necessarily mean you should always avoid visiting at this time – just be sure to take sensible precautions in the water, such as wearing stinger suits and only swimming at guarded beaches.

If you're planning to make your own way around Cairns and its surrounds, you can rent a car. There is plenty of on- and off-street parking around the city, and many hotels will have free or paid on-site parking. However, with public transport, shuttle buses and tour operators providing hotel transfers, you can easily explore the region without a vehicle.

Cairns Airport is just a 15-minute drive or taxi transfer from the city centre, and is well serviced by domestic flights across Australia. Some international airlines also fly direct to Cairns, depending on where you're flying in from.

No matter when or how you choose to visit, Cairns will open your eyes to some of the most stunning natural wonders the world has to offer, and you'll need a good week to take it all in.



The ancient ecosystem of Daintree stretches from rainforest to reef, and is a must-see during your stay

DAINTREE

A good starting point for your Daintree adventure is the Discovery Centre. The National Park covers an area of 1,200 square kilometres (460 square miles). Some of the best beaches in the region can be found in Daintree, such as Cape Tribulation and Wonga. Make your way into the heart of the forest to discover the charming Daintree Village, where you can shop for local arts and crafts, go wildlife watching, or take a cruise along the river. You can stay in Daintree Village to enjoy a relaxed rainforest break; the area's accommodation ranges from campsites to eco-lodges and spas.

Daintree is part of Kuku Yalanji country, and is an area of great cultural and spiritual importance. At the Mossman Gorge Centre, you can discover the indigenous history of the Daintree and its significance to the Eastern Kuku Yalanji people through guided Dreamtime Walks. Your local guide will take you on an insightful tour of the area, explaining and demonstrating traditional activities and ceremonies along the way.

Each one of Fiji's islands is special, accessible either by boat or plane to the larger ones

Essential information

Fiji is the perfect place to learn to dive if you've never tried it.

Best time to visit

July to September

Time zone

UTC+12

CURRENCY

$

FIJIAN DOLLAR

Useful sites

WWW.FIJI.TRAVEL
MALAMALABEACHCLUB.COM
WWW.PURE-TAVEUNI.COM

97

Fiji

Island hop through this tropical paradise in the South Pacific Ocean

It's only when you step on a white sandy beach under a row of swaying palm trees, with warm clear water breaking quietly in the background, that you realise that all those postcard pictures of Fiji are true to life. Fiji is a tropical paradise that has a big beach culture, catering for those looking for adventure as well as for those wanting to simply kick back.

Fiji is comprised of hundreds of islands – 333 of them to be exact – with the two main islands, Viti Levu and Vanua Levu, holding much of the country's population. The country's harbour capital, Suva, offers a place for travellers to replenish their backpacks before heading out for an island adventure.

The Fijian people are warm-hearted and friendly. Fiji is thought of as one of the happiest nations in the world, and the tight-knit communities and family-focused outlook make for a warm welcome wherever you go. Once you've adapted yourself to 'Fiji time', a concept that represents a laid-back approach to getting things done, life in Fiji becomes somewhat therapeutic and dreamy.

From the main airport in Nadi, catch a flight to Taveuni, the Garden Island, to find secluded sandy beaches, hidden waterfalls and incredible forests. The best way to explore beaches and islands is by kayak, and there are plenty of places offering them up for hire. It's entirely possible to paddle out and find empty islands to enjoy all to yourself. Taveuni has a meeting point where the international date line cuts through Fiji, separating today and yesterday. Why not hire a tent to camp out on a beach and wake up to the waves breaking on the shore every morning?

For the more adventurous travellers, head out on an unforgettable snorkelling tour to get up-close and personal with sharks and other marine life in the clear waters off Fiji's Kuata Island. Alternatively, try your hand at underwater scootering, or dive down to a sunken wreck with certified divers taking the lead. Visit the beautiful Malamala Beach Club, located on its own island, to enjoy beachside cocktails and pristine waters to snorkel in. Islands such as Mana and Navini are the perfect locations to get away from it all, where you can stay for just one night before heading onto the next island.

When you're not bathing in the warm ocean waters, pay a visit to the multi-coloured Sri Siva Subramaniya Temple, a sacred Hindu site located in Nadi. It's well worth booking a tour to visit local villages and learn about the Fijian culture and way of life, and also about lovo – the way that food is prepared in banana leaves and then cooked over hot rocks underground. This is usually followed by a ceremony called meke, a tradition that encompasses storytelling through song and dance. Whether it's a relaxing cruise to numerous beaches, a scuba-diving experience or kayaking with friends across clear waters, Fiji is a place that shouldn't get left out.

Fiordland National Park

The artistry and grandeur of nature are unsurpassed in New Zealand's Fiordland National Park

The poet Rudyard Kipling called Milford Sound the 'eighth wonder of the world', but this is only one of many natural wonders carved and crafted through the centuries at the Fiordland National Park, tucked along the southwest edge of New Zealand's South Island.

Established in 1952, Fiordland National Park is home to a number of spectacular vistas for visitors to enjoy. 12,607 square kilometres (4,868 square miles) are preserved, where mountains push skyward, deep and dark fjords have been etched by nature, and verdant valleys stretch far beyond the horizon. Nature's handiwork is on display in its grandest, most exhilarating fashion.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Fiordland National Park includes Milford, Dusky and Doubtful Sounds. It's also home to three of the world's most renowned hiking treks: the Kepler, Routeburn and Milford Track.

Milford Track is probably the most famous hiker's journey in New Zealand, traversing 53 kilometres (33 miles) through distant valleys and in the shadow of soaring mountains, beside crystal blue lakes and among ancient rainforests. It finishes at Sutherland Falls, the tallest waterfall in New Zealand and a wondrous sight to behold. Millennia ago, when glaciers crept across the land and created the finger-like fjords – actually flooded U-shaped valleys left by these rivers of ice – they also created other interesting formations. Visitors have been awe-struck with their splendour since indigenous peoples gathered there in ages past.

Today, visiting Fiordland National Park is a pilgrimage for lovers of natural beauty. Flights into the resort city of Queenstown are regular, and air services are available in Te Anau, the gateway to the park, Manapouri and Milford Sound. The two-hour drive from Queenstown to Te Anau is around 172 kilometres (107 miles). Car rentals are easy to find in Queenstown, and scenic drives enable motorists to view points of interest. Fiordland National Park may also be experienced via boat tour or chartered aircraft, offering different perspectives on the dark cliffs rising directly from the depths of the lakes.

Visits to Fiordland National Park should begin at the Department of Conservation Visitor Centre, where reservations can be made and itineraries planned. Rare species of plants and animals reside within the park, and the Te Anau Bird Sanctuary is a favourite for those wishing to catch a glimpse of the Fiordland Crested Pengui (or tawaki) or the Kaka. The etched limestone caverns of Glowworm Caves reward adventurers with a spectacular subterranean waterfall. Fishermen angle for brown and rainbow trout in the Waiau River, along with cod, tuna and other saltwater species along the shoreline. Hunting is allowed, but a permit is required.

Milford and Doubtful Sounds exhibit their own charms, including the sheer cliffs, roaring waterfalls and occasional visits of bottlenose dolphins. Lake Manapouri is the second deepest in New Zealand, offering visitors a perfect opportunity for a boat cruise or kayak paddling.

Only 20 minutes' drive from Te Anau, the village of Manapouri lies adjacent to the shimmering lake that shares its name. Both towns offer resort accommodations, economically priced rooms and other lodgings. Numerous restaurants and picnic areas provide diverse dining options, and popular local foods include lobster and venison.

This stunning perspective of Milford Sound is just a sampling of the wonders of Fiordland National Park in New Zealand

Essential information

The climate in Fiordland is generally moderate, but weather can change rapidly. Be prepared for all possibilities.

Best time to visit

September to November

Time zone

UTC+12

CURRENCY

$ NEW ZEALAND DOLLAR

Useful sites

FIORDLAND.ORG.NZ
DOC.GOVT.NZ/PARKS-AND-RECREATION/PLACES-TO-GO/FIORDLAND/PLACES/FIORDLAND-NATIONAL-PARK
BACKPACKERGUIDE.NZ/FIORDLAND-NATIONAL-PARK-GUIDE-FOR-BACKPACKERS

Across Tasmania, you're never much further than an hour's drive from paradise, such as Trousers Point, near Lacotta on Flinders Island

09

Tasmania

Australia's island offers a rugged landscape, befitting its storied past

Every day, the Spirit of Tasmania whisks visitors from Melbourne to Tasmania's northern coastal city of Devonport. The city offers a hearty welcome, with a casual beachside stroll to the red and white Mersey Lighthouse. By the bluff, Aboriginal rock carvings hint at the region's indigenous heritage, dating back tens of thousands of years before its more recent colonisation and influx of convicts.

After a day of fishing, rowing and sailing, and a trip to the stunning Tasmanian Arboretum, Cradle Mountain-Lake St Clair National Park calls. Here, the epic week-long Overland Track takes hikers through the bushland, where glacial water drips down mountainsides into steady lakes, and cold waterfalls spit into thick rainforests. Its trees date back thousands of years, providing shade to the park's platypus, echidna and, of course, Tasmanian devils.

To the west, the coastal town of Strahan is true frontier territory – a Wild West, where convicts and settlers pushed themselves to their natural limits. Though rife with on-trend restaurants and quaint shops, it sits just south of the soaring Henty Dunes, shaped by winds roaring all the way from South America. The West Coast Wilderness Railway, meanwhile, is a comfortable way to explore the region's extremely uncomfortable past – complete with a rainforest stroll, gold panning and honey tasting.

On the opposite coast lies Hobart, the state capital, and a hub of art, food and culture. Framed by mountains and sea, and an hour from the stunning Mount Field National Park, the city overflows with fresh food and artisanal markets. Mona (Museum of Old and New Art) curates a striking blend of modern art and ancient heritage, set within a deliciously contemporary building, driven into the cliffs.

An hour and a half away, originally built as a timber station, Port Arthur grew into one of the country's most notorious prisons. Dubbed 'inescapable', despite its beautiful surroundings, it was the bane of 12,500 convicts' lives from 1830 and 1877. Fittingly, the World Heritage Site has its own Ghost Tour, for those who dare to explore its ruins by lantern light.

After a short stop at the state's second city of Launceston, with its colonial and Victorian cityscapes and parks, the Tamar River flows through vineyards, orchards, forested hills and scores of riverside villages. In Tasmania's far northeast, the Bay of Fires spans 50 kilometres (31 miles) of coastline, from Eddystone Point to Binalong Bay. Multi-day hikes traverse sandy beaches and heathland, over boulders and through eucalyptus forests, with plenty of time for snorkelling and birdwatching.

Further south, Freycinet National Park features pink cliffs and empty white beaches, with only exotic birds to keep visitors company. A short ramble away, at Wineglass Bay, white sand gives way turquoise sea. With lagoons to explore, along with wallabies and black swans to spot, it will have visitors unpacking their tents, and digging their feet in for the long haul.

Essential information

Those hiking the Overland Track from October to May should book in advance.

Best time to visit

December to February (for festivals) or March to May (for hiking)

Time zone

UTC+10

CURRENCY
$
AUSTRALIAN DOLLAR

Useful sites

WWW.PARKS.TAS.GOV.AU
WWW.TASMANIA.COM
WWW.TASWALKINGCO.COM.AU

100

Rotorua

New Zealand is one of Earth's most beautiful countries and Rotorua is a prime example of why

A land of geothermal activity, Rotorua is not exactly love at first sniff. The town's lingering eggy, sulphuric air is perhaps the first thing visitors notice when approaching it. However, the source of this smell is far too remarkable to turn one's nose up at.

In the heart of the city, an innocuous weekly market hawks fresh fruit, crafts, clothing, souvenirs and other goods, but Kuirau is not your average park. Bubbling and hissing, it hints at a great, unstoppable menace below. According to Maori legend, the gods first heated up the park's small lake to punish a water-dwelling taniwha for kidnapping a young woman.

Just three kilometres (1.9 miles) away, at Whakarewarewa, 500 hot springs and 65 geyser vents surround what was once the unconquered fortress of Te Puia, founded in 1325 CE. The local Maori who inhabit this 'living village' continue to rely upon the traditional, eco-friendly geothermal energy source for heating and cooking. Today, visitors can learn more about Maori culture, music and food, cooked over hot stones, just by the country's largest geyser. Erupting 15 times a day, Pohutu blasts boiling hot water 30 metres (100 feet) high – fitting for a geyser whose name literally means 'big splash'.

The only Maori-owned thermal park, Tikitere, or 'Hell's Gate', has remained holy ground to the Ngati Rangiteaorere tribe. It is Rotorua's most energetic landscape, 20 hectares (50 acres) marked by spitting mud pits, angry geysers, steaming hot springs and the southern hemisphere's largest hot waterfall, the terrifyingly destructive Kakahi.

The black pool is a nightmarish pond, ever set to 93 degrees Celsius (199 degrees Fahrenheit) – so hot, it's used to cook food. Elsewhere, colourful bacteria known as 'land corals' sprout upon the alien landscape, flourishing from its unusual conditions. Though even in hell, there is paradise, in the form of the Wai Ora and Hells Gate spas, a tantalising set of mud baths and hot springs, simmering with replenishing nutrients.

Another park, Wai-O-Tapu Thermal Wonderland, is a brightly coloured spectacle, where hot springs peacock in various shades of orange, yellow, turquoise and emerald. Not content to choose just one, the Champagne Pool rings its green centre with a skirting of orange. The park's Lady Knox Geyser is set off every morning with a curious trick, discovered by a chain gang in the 1900s: pouring soap into its spout.

Elsewhere, in the Hidden Valley, lies one of the world's only two geothermal caves, Ruatapu, or 'Sacred Hole', driving 37 metres (120 feet) underground, into a hot pool named Waiwhakaata, or 'pool of mirrors'.

Four of Rotorua's geothermal parks lie on the Te Ara Ahi cycling trail, its off-road sections a pleasant ride even for casual riders. Eager bunnies can even whisk themselves through Redwoods Mountain Park, a 5,600-hectare (13,838-acre) forest. Here, unusual vegetation blooms alongside volcanic craters and steaming rainbow-coloured rocks.

For something a little different, at Waitomo Caves boats drift into the darkness, illuminated by the soft light of glow-worms. A more exciting alternative is to abseil down into the caves, throttling through via zipline, and leaping off underground waterfalls.

Essential information

Rotorua is perhaps the place to immerse yourself in Maori culture.

Best time to visit

March to May (to avoid the crowds and winter)

Time zone

UTC+12

Currency

$ New Zealand Dollar

Useful sites

www.waitomo.com
www.newzealand.com
www.waiotapu.co.nz

Rotorua's pungent hot springs come in a wide variety of colours, such as the Champagne Pool at Wai-O-Tapu

French Polynesia

Heaven on Earth, this tropical island paradise in the South Pacific has to be seen to be believed

It's no surprise that the French Polynesian islands are among the top honeymoon destinations in the world. This little slice of heaven in between Australia and South America in the South Pacific is one of the most awe-inspiring destinations. Close your eyes and picture it: crystal-clear turquoise lagoons, lush-green mountains and breathtaking beaches dotted with palm trees. It's like something out of a dream.

Also known as the islands of Tahiti, French Polynesia is made up of 118 islands and atolls spread across 2.5 million square kilometres (9.6 million square miles). It can be divided into five groups of islands: the Society Islands, the Tuamotu archipelago, the Marquesas Islands, the Gambier Islands and the Austral Islands. Tahiti and Bora Bora may be the most famous, but there's a whole host of islands to explore and each one has its own unique identity.

The largest island is Tahiti where 70 per cent of the population of French Polynesia live. No matter which island you're visiting, this is where your journey begins as you fly into Faa'a International Airport. While your journey may continue elsewhere, Tahiti is definitely worth a stopover and time to explore.

Shaped like the figure eight, the island is made up of two volcanoes: the larger Tahiti Nui and the smaller Tahiti Iti. It's known for its jagged mountains, including Mount Orohena, the country's highest peak; its waterfalls, such as Faarumai Waterfalls; and black sand beaches. The island should be explored either by hiking on foot or in a 4x4 vehicle. Go shopping in its capital Papeete in the northwest, or taste the local cuisine from the roulottes or food trucks. Experience the world's biggest surf at Teahupo'o or get splashed at the Arahoho Blowhole. Take in some culture by visiting the Robert Wan Pearl Museum, the only museum dedicated to pearls, or learn about island heritage at the Tahiti and Her Islands Museum.

Described by author James Michener as 'the most beautiful island in the world', Bora Bora, to the northwest of Tahiti, is renowned for its natural beauty and luxury, high-end resorts. One of the best dive spots across the globe, the island is surrounded by a blue jewel of a lagoon and a spectacular coral reef, which means it's teeming with marine life. You can relax in a luxurious overwater bungalow with stunning views of Mount Otemanu, or go snorkelling or scuba diving with sharks and stingrays. Head to Matira Beach for a stunning sunset.

After Bora Bora, Mo'orea is probably the second most popular island for honeymooners. Shaped like a heart, the island's main draws are its distinctive mountains, including Mount Mouaputa (which has a hole in its summit), the 'shark tooth' Mount Mouaroa, and the highest peak Mount Tohiea, as well as its two bays, Cook's Bay and Opunohu Bay – ideal for hiking and scuba diving.

A 40-minute flight from Tahiti, Huahine may not be as well known as Bora Bora or Mo'orea, but it's equally beautiful. Known as the 'garden island' because of its lush-green forests and fertile volcanic soil, you'll find plenty of vanilla, banana and melons growing here. Huahine is also home to Maeva Marae, one of the most significant archaeological areas, and the sacred blue-eyed eels of Faie.

Rangiroa is the largest atoll in French Polynesia. If you want to go diving and see dolphins, sharks

Essential information

This may be paradise, but there are lots of bugs so remember to pack some spray.

Best time to visit

May to October

Time zone

UTC-10

Currency

₣

French Pacific Franc

Useful sites

WWW.MUSEETAHITI.PF
WWW.TAHITITOURISME.COM/EN-US
HTTPS://TRAVEL.PADI.COM/D/FRENCH-POLYNESIA

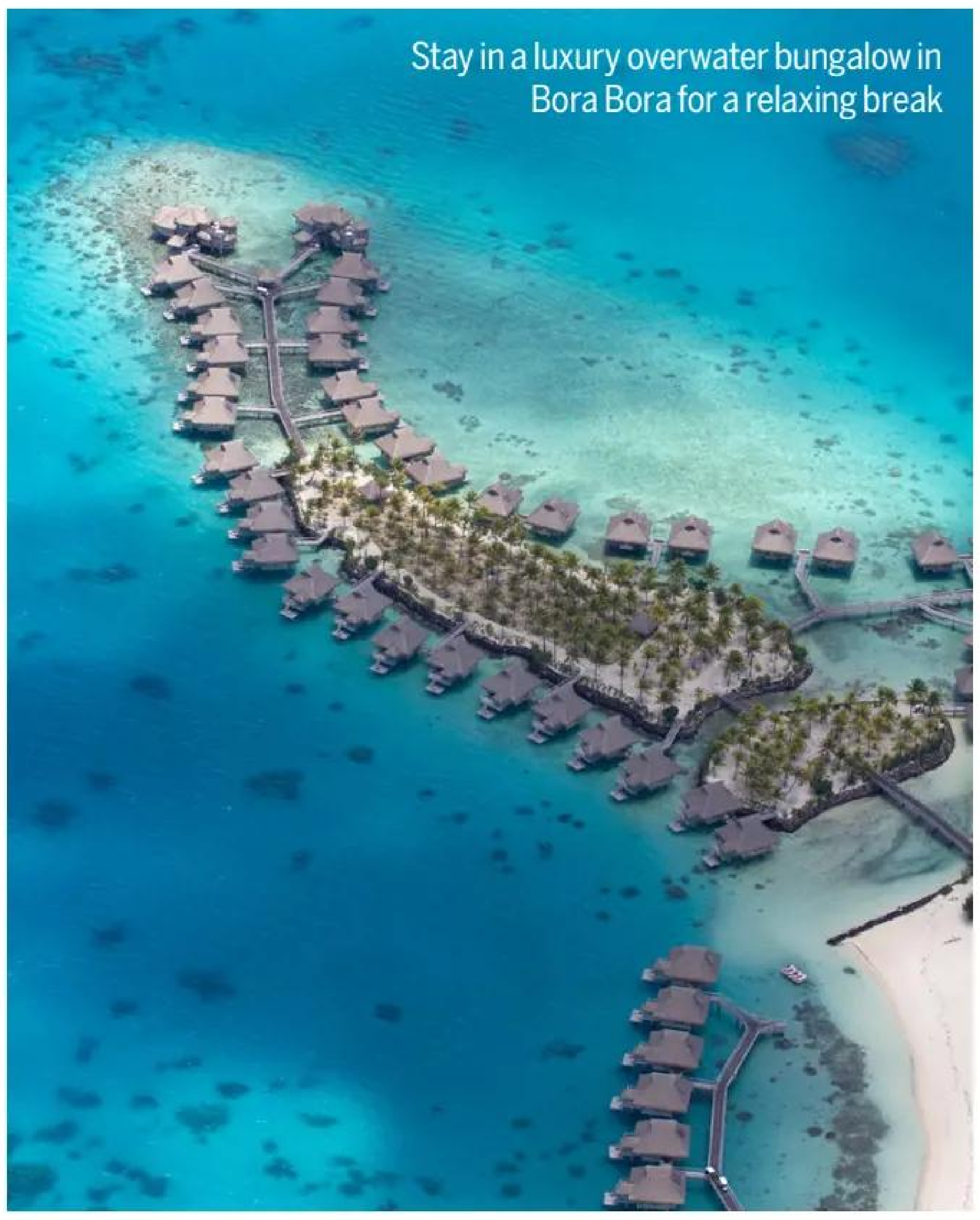
Bora Bora is famous for the picture-perfect translucent lagoon that surrounds it

French Polynesia is one of the best diving spots in the world, with exotic marine life and coral reef

The Heiva festival is a wonderful way to see the best of Polynesian culture

Black pearls make a stunning souvenir to remember this romantic paradise by

TAHITI AND BORA BORA MAY BE FAMOUS, BUT THERE'S A WHOLE HOST OF ISLANDS



Stay in a luxury overwater bungalow in Bora Bora for a relaxing break

and manta rays, Tiputa Pass is the best spot. It's particularly good for drift diving. The atoll may be secluded, but one thing it does have is its own vineyard. The Dominique Auroy Winery makes French Polynesia's only wine label, Vin de Tahiti.

Raiatea and Taha'a both share the same lagoon. Raiatea is known as the 'sacred island' and is home to one of the most important ancient temples in Polynesia and a UNESCO World Heritage Site, Marae Taputapuatea. This is the only place where the tiare apetahi, one of the rarest flowers in existence, can be found. Taha'a is called the vanilla island as it grows some of the best vanilla beans in the world. It's also home to the Champon Pearl Farm where you can learn all about pearl farming. If you're looking for somewhere a bit more off the beaten track, these two islands offer sandy white beaches, hiking with incredible views and waterfalls, as well as the only wreck diving in French Polynesia.

The list of islands goes on. Visit Tikehau to stroll along its exotic pink sand; go diving in Rurutu from June to October to spot humpback whales; or go to a church made from coral in Fakarava. The isolated island of Nuku Hiva has lots of interesting sites to explore. Visit the beautiful Notre Dame Cathedral, take a photo with a giant tiki statue or get a traditional tattoo from one of the best artists in the country.

French Polynesia may be famous for its romantic postcard-perfect location and luxury honeymoon bungalows, but the islands offer so much more. It's a haven for wildlife lovers with more than 800 unique fish species. It's a playground for adventurers not only for diving and snorkelling in crystal-clear waters and coral gardens, but for surfing, hiking, caving, cliff jumping, waterfall climbing and lava tube exploring.

Foodies can enjoy incredible fresh seafood including the local poisson cru, raw fish marinated in coconut milk and lime. Plus, there's more than 3,000 years of history to uncover for culture lovers. Visit in July for the Heiva festival, a month-long celebration of Polynesian culture including song and dance, ancient ceremonies, fire-walking and traditional sports like coconutting. There's even something for film fans, as *Mutiny on the Bounty* was filmed here. Marlon Brando was so enchanted by French Polynesia that he bought the island of Tetiaroa.

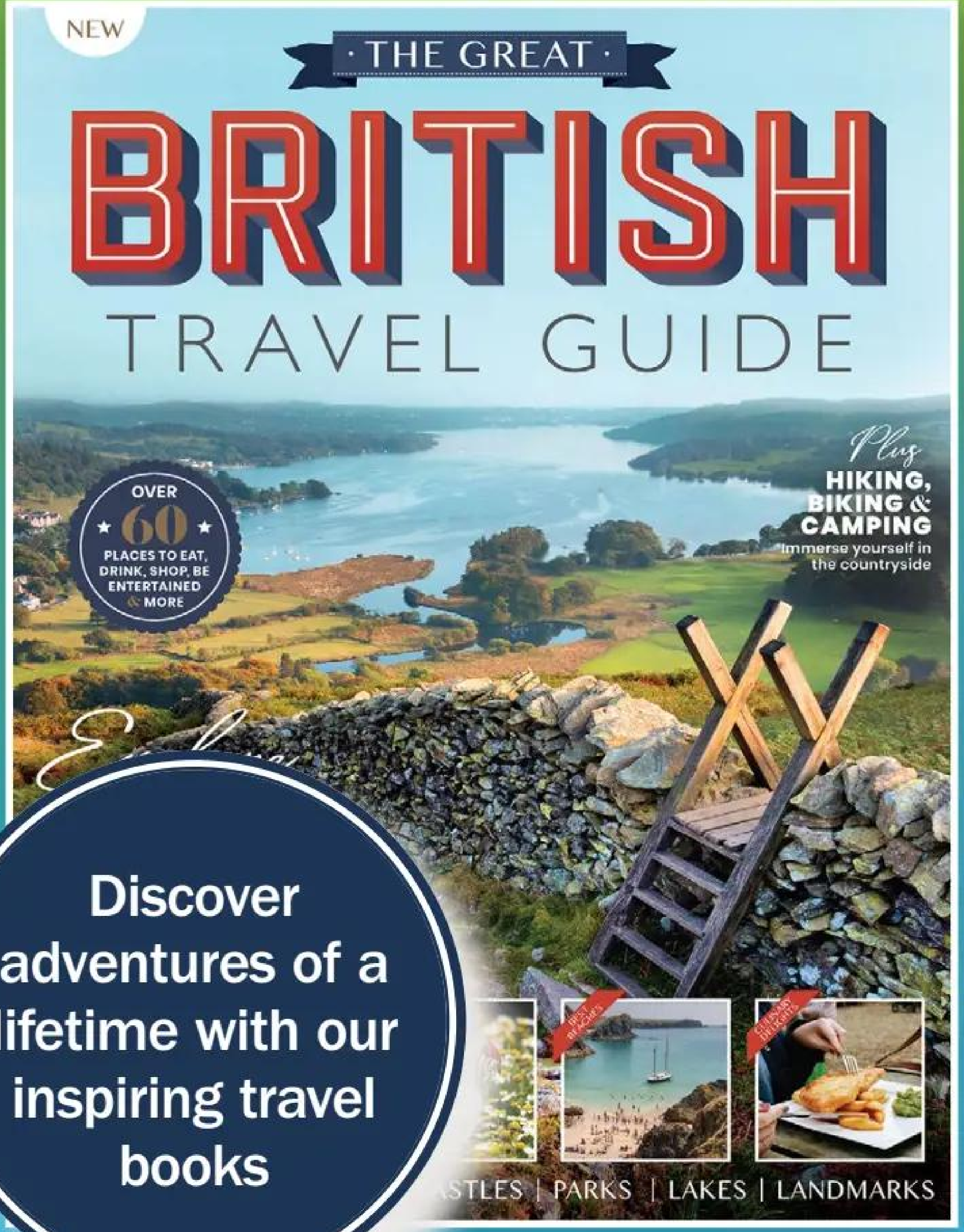
You're bound to fall in love with the islands too. The best way to make the most of your trip is to go island hopping. Whether you move around by air or by boat, it's a chance to see what makes each island special.

While you are taking in all that French Polynesia has to offer, don't forget to look up. It not only has stunning sunsets and sunrises to top off its jaw-dropping views, but because of the low air pollution, the night skies are perfect for stargazing.

PEARLS OF THE PACIFIC

French Polynesia may be famous for being a honeymooners' paradise, but the islands are not the only pearl in the Pacific Ocean. These natural gems, which have long been a symbol of love and romance, are farmed in the Tuamotu-Gambier archipelago. The most valuable is the black pearl, which comes from the black lip oyster. They vary in colour from light grey to green, but the true black pearl, considered the most beautiful pearl in the world, is rare. Also known as the Tahitian pearl, it is the country's biggest export. The Municipal Market in Papeete in Tahiti sells pearls, but it's advisable to buy them instead from a reputable dealer, such as Robert Wan Tahiti. The shop can be found next to the museum in Tahiti and on all of the main islands. Don't forget to buy them tax-free so you can claim back the tax at the airport.

French Polynesian pristine beaches range in colour from white and black to an exotic pink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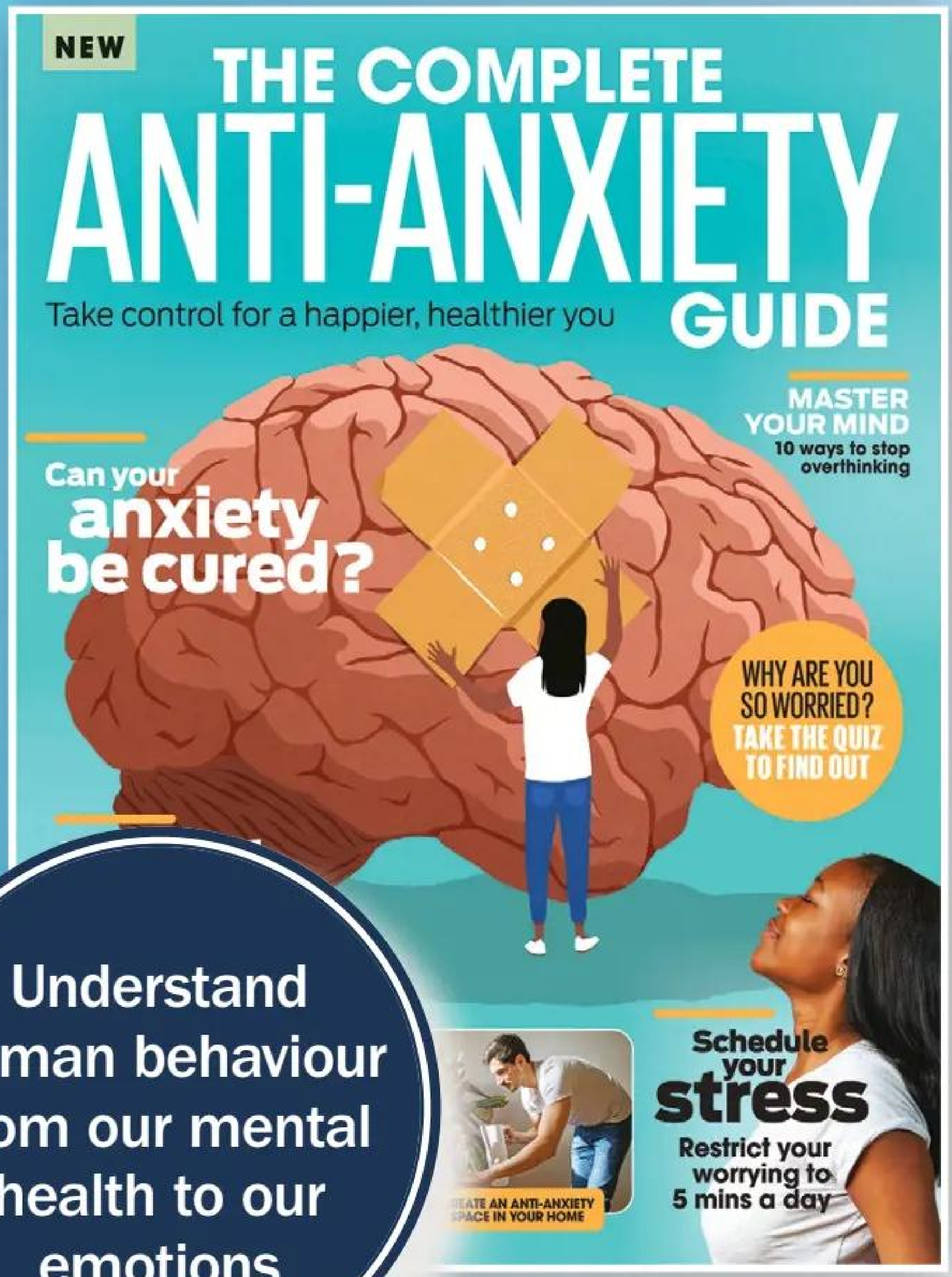
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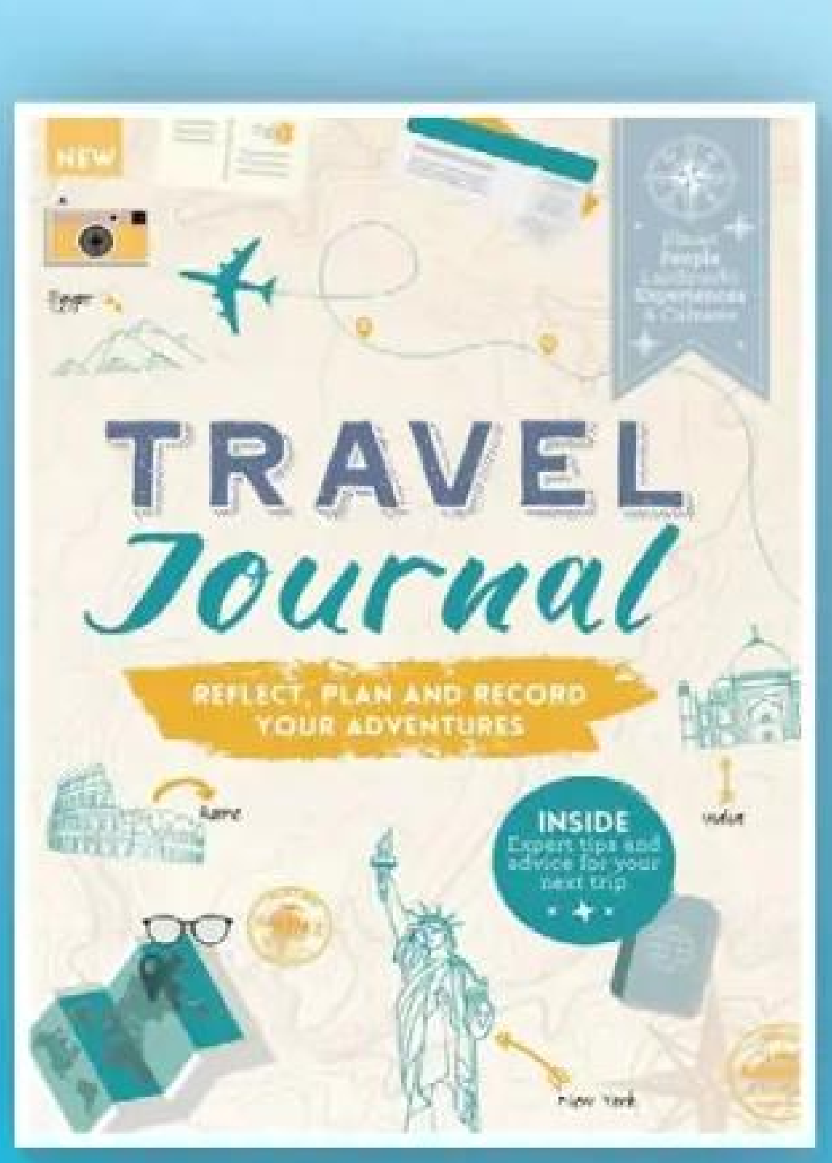
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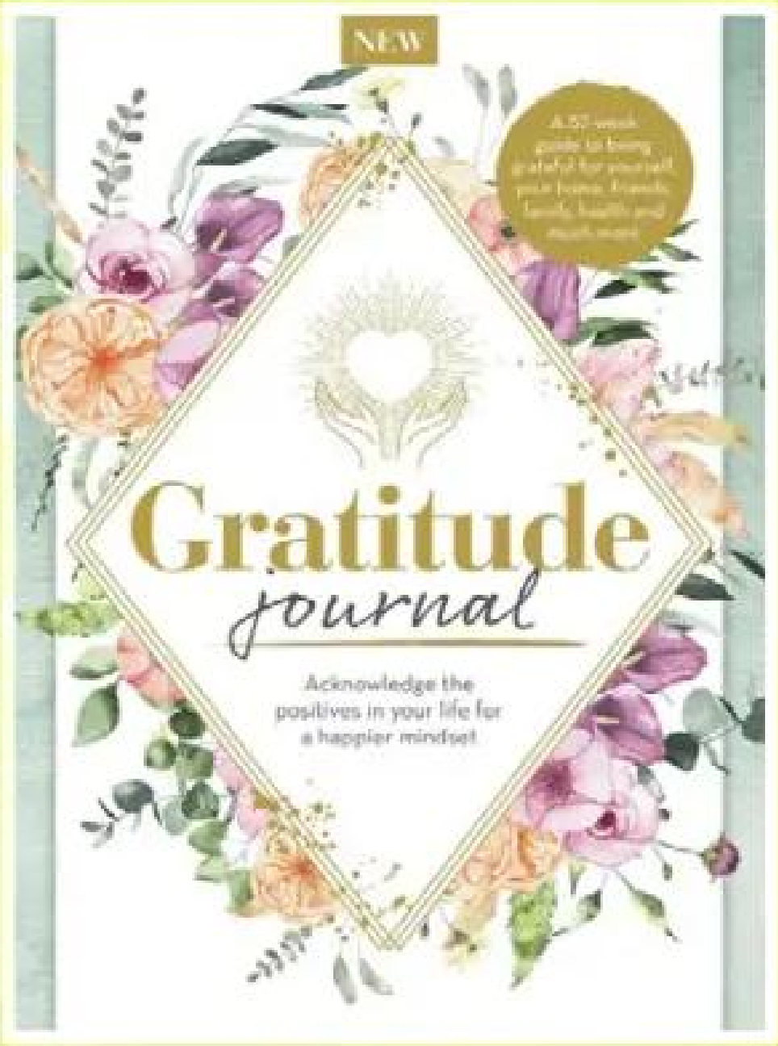

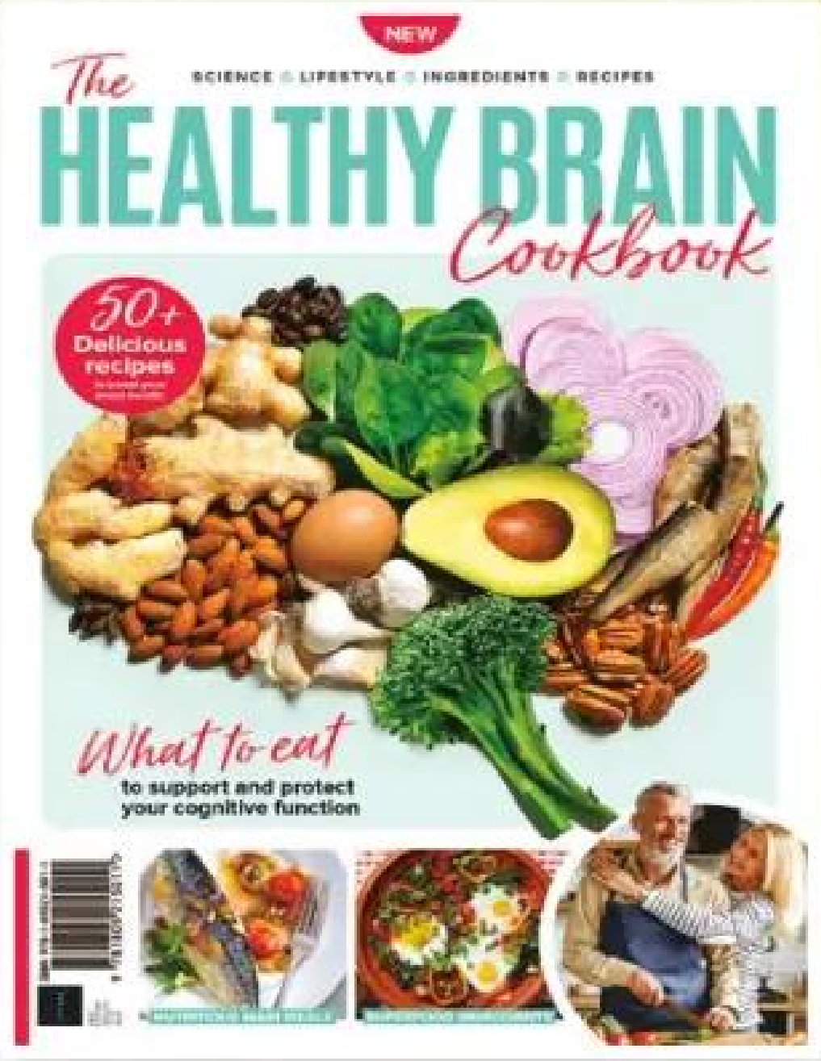

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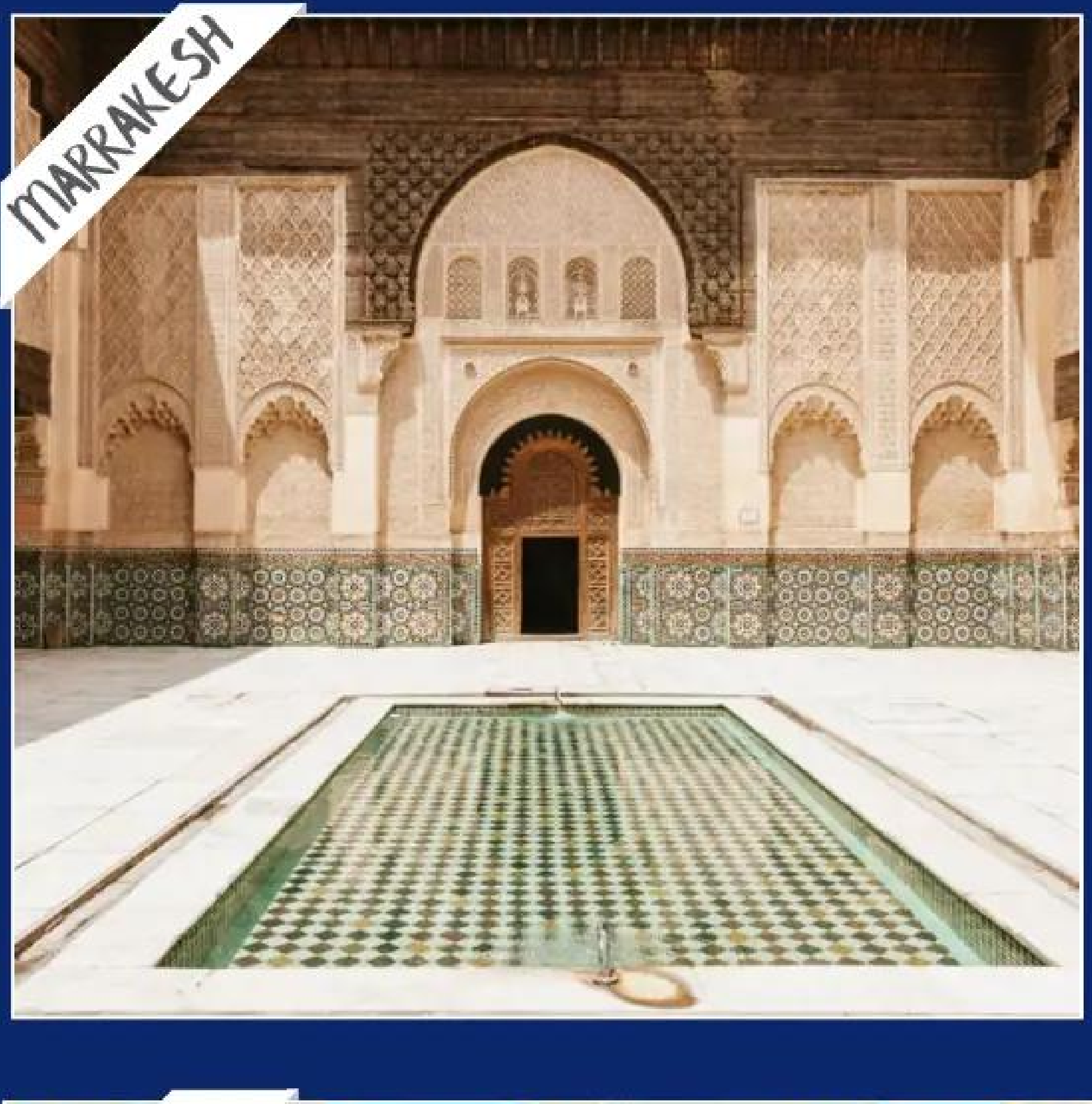

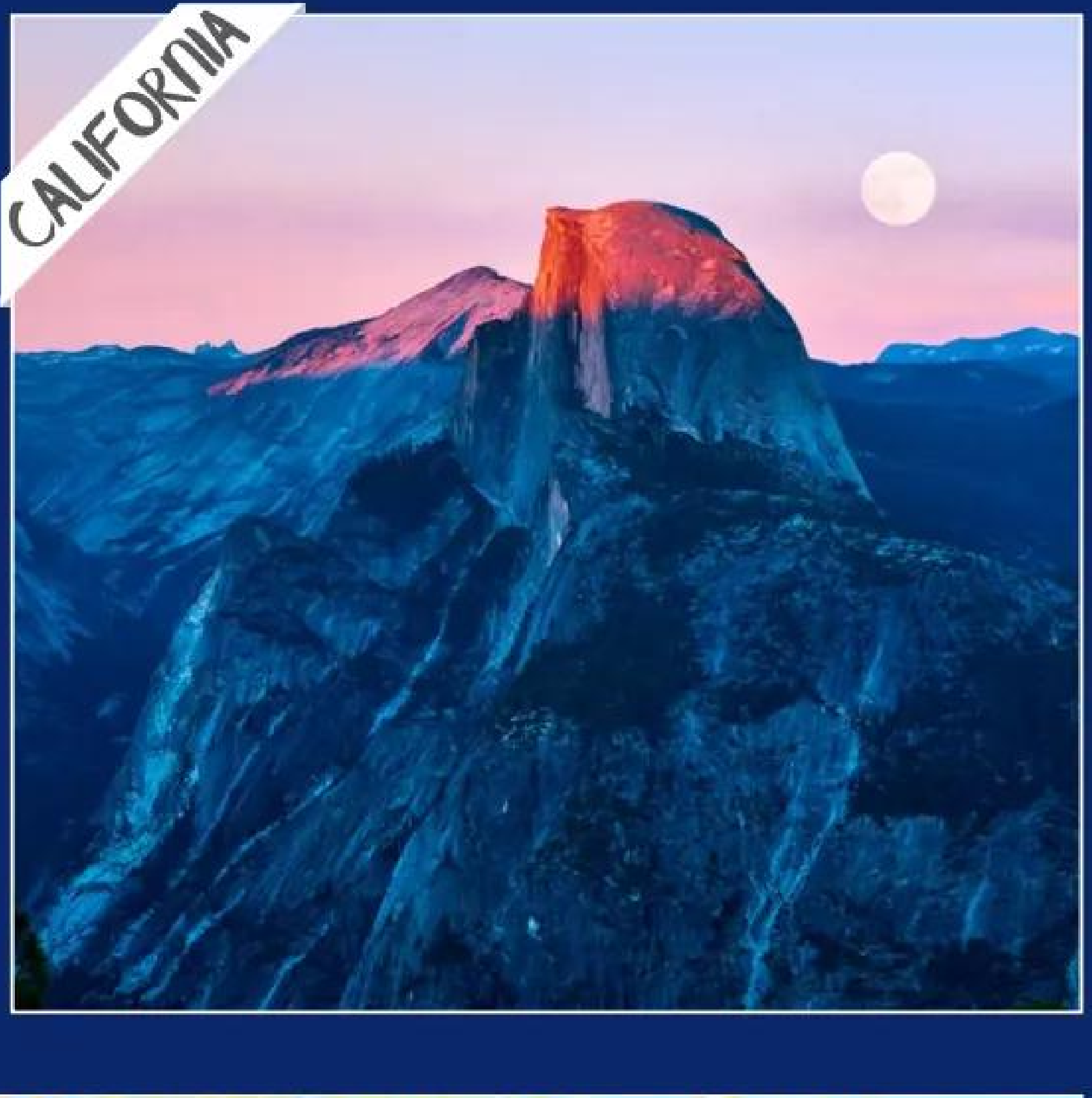
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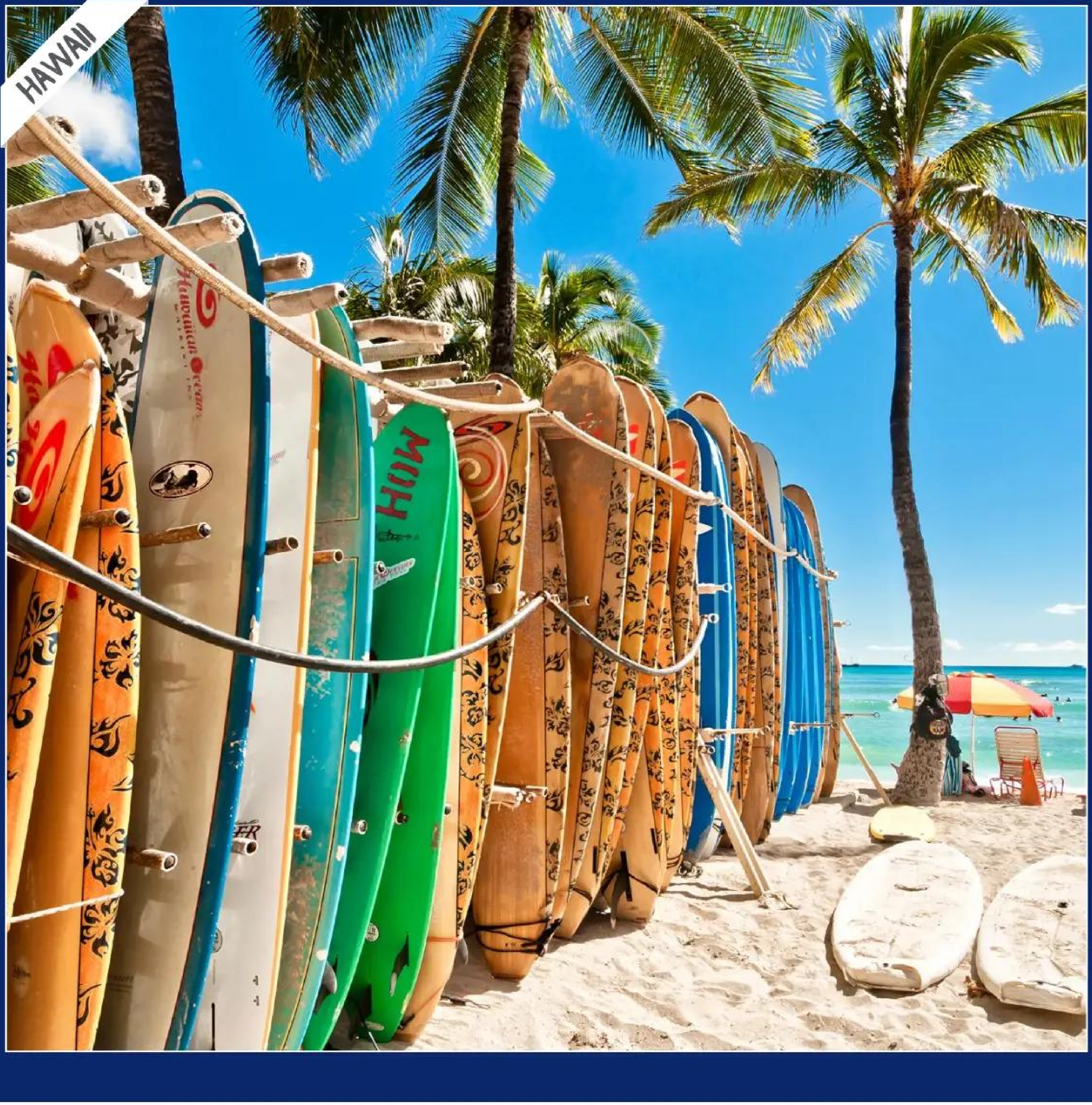

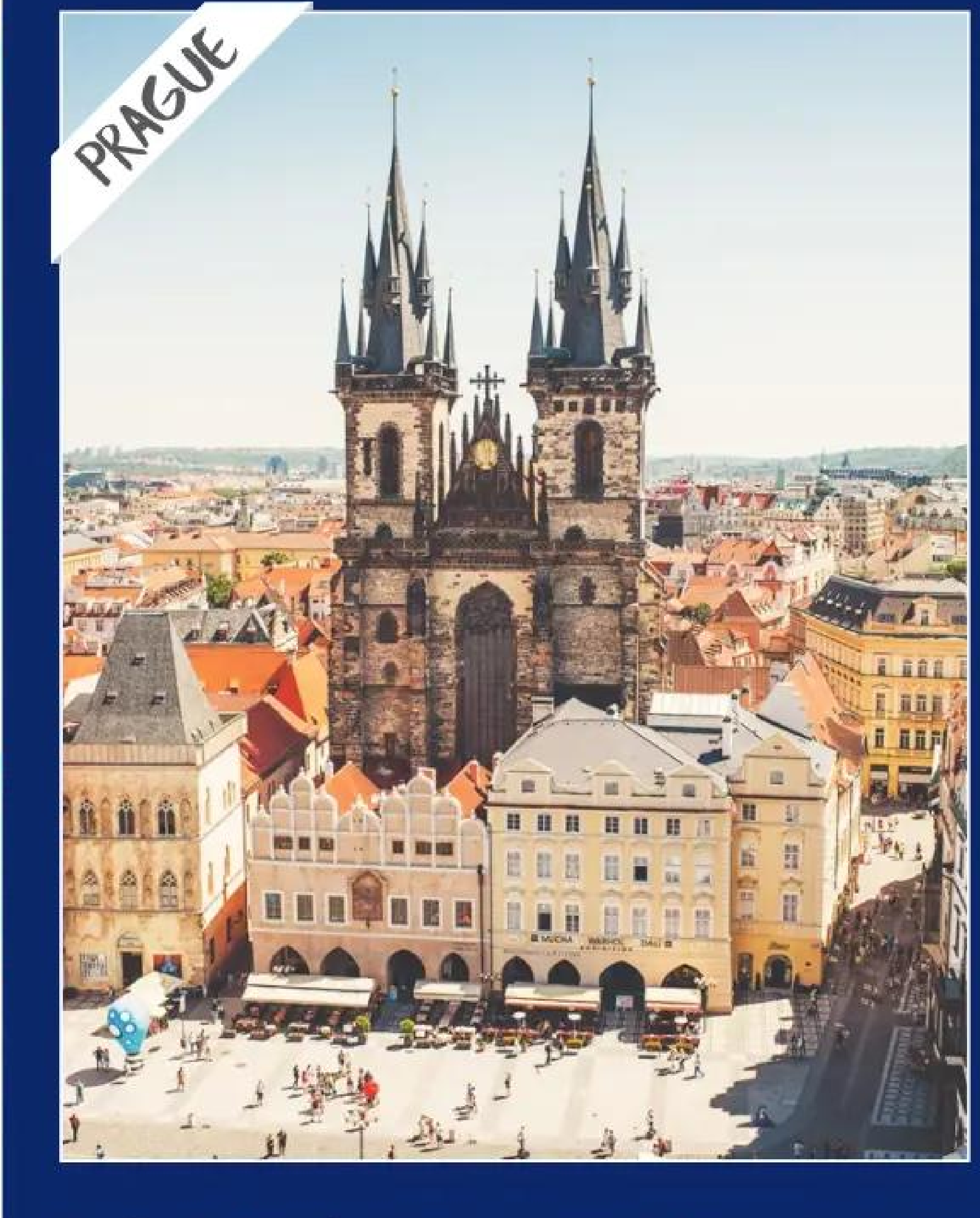

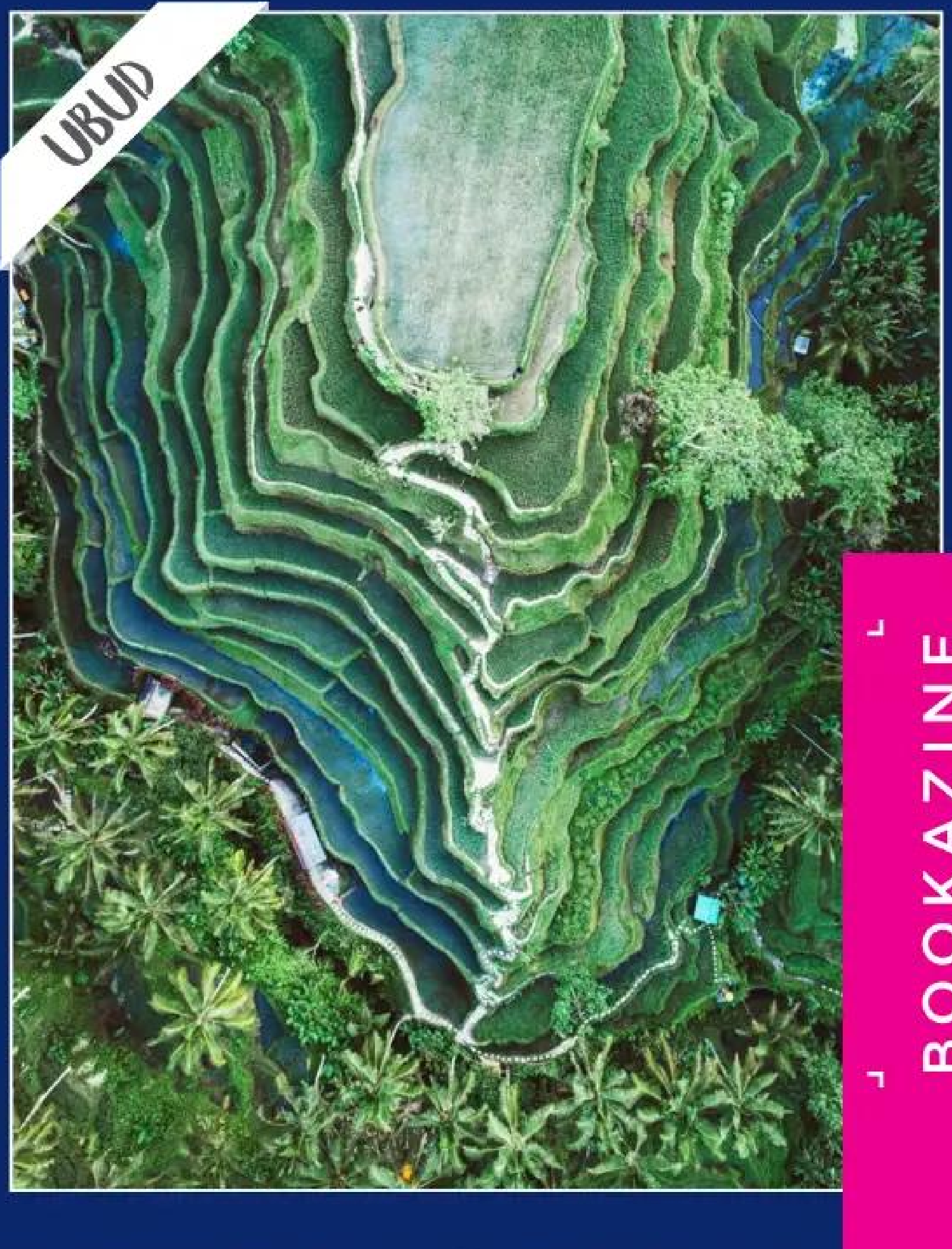

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